

GameOn

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ISSUE 154

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5 PREVIEWS
& 15 ARTICLES

F1 22

THE QUARRY

**MONSTER HUNTER
RISE
SUNBREAK**

VAMPIRE

THE MASQUERADE

| SWANSONG |



Welcome





Welcome to issue 154 of The GameOn Magazine!

It's officially Summer now, and even in the usually grey lands of the GameOn headquarters the sun has been beating down. Thankfully most of us like to hide inside anyway, so extra gaming time ahoy, meaning more content for you to read about.

In the articles section this month, we've got our regular So I Tried features, as well as some helpful Tips and Tricks for anyone trying V Rising for the first time. And if you've ever wondered whether you can enjoy Animal Crossing: Pocket Camp without having to cash out lots of money, then Artura gives us the low-down.

We've got more vampire-goodness in our previews this issue, with Alana taking a sneak peek at Vampire Survivors and keeping in with the occult she also treats us to a look at the very cute Little Witch in the Woods. Both of these are in Steam Early Access right now, so if you enjoy the previews you can grab them straight away!

Of course there are a whole host of reviews for you to check out. Erin gives us her thoughts on the controversial horror title from 2K, The Quarry and uses her veteran TTRPG status to get really in-depth with the new World of Darkness offering of Vampire: The Masquerade - Swansong. If you're not a fan of all this vampire/horror business then you can check out Alana's thoughts on Sonic Origins, Mike's look at Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge, or Steven's racy review of F1 22.

These just scratch the surface though, so we're sure you'll find plenty more to enjoy. Take care and GameOn until the next issue!

We want your feedback!

If you could change anything about this magazine, what would it be?

For instance: not enough news, or too many articles, anything you want us to start adding... Please email me personally, your email will not be passed on to any third party.

steve@gameonmag.com

THE EDITOR

Contributors

Editor-in-Chief
Editor
Editor
Editorial Designer

Steve Greenfield
Andrew Duncan
Emsey Walker
Andrew Duncan

Games Critic
Games Critic
Games Critic
Games Critic
Games Critic
Games Critic
Games Critic
Games Critic
Games Critic
Games Critic
Games Critic
Games Critic
Games Critic

Alana Dunitz
Andrew Duncan
Artura Dawn
Bex Prouse
Carson Clark
Charr Davenport
Dylan Pamintuan
Erin McAllister
Jamie Davies
Josh Vale
Mike Crewe
Samiee Tee
Spooky_One
Steven Dawson



10 V Rising Tips & Tricks

By Artura Dawn

Just spawned in V Rising? Artura has you covered!



So, you just started your blood-sucking adventures and you want to make Dracula proud. Maybe you're not very good at avoiding the sunlight or you just don't know how often to feed before you're considered gluttonous. Well, I've got you covered, batling; here are 10 tips & tricks for V Rising!

#1 — Do your quests

I'm gonna be honest, when I first started playing V Rising, I thought that the quests would cease and I'd go to open-ended gameplay, but soon realised that they're important.

Getting Ready for the Hunt

I scavenged the area around me, gathering what I needed to prepare myself for my next hunt.

- ☒ Construct and interact with a Sawmill
- ☐ Construct and interact with a Simple Workbench
- ☐ Increase your Gear Level by crafting stronger equipment [10/15]

Unlocks Blueprint: Blood Altar



Thing is, these quests work as your objectives throughout V Rising, so you'll want to progress those not only to continue your storyline but unlock more crafting recipes and things to do.

#2 — Advance until you unlock the Blood Altar and defeat your first V Blood enemy

Tying in directly with #1, you'll want to advance those objectives until you've unlocked the Blood Altar and get the opportunity to fight your first V Blood enemy.

Each V Blood enemy unlocks something useful, and although I won't spoil what you'll unlock for your first feast, you'll certainly want to get it early. Not only that, but ideally you have the ability to start hunting V Blood enemies to unlock skills while you continue growing your evil almighty castle of doom.

#3 — Use your blood types accordingly

This might seem obvious, but I figured I'd add it here for safety regardless; once you've learned about blood types, you're going to want to focus your objectives according to which type (and quality) of blood you have available to you at any given moment.

If you have worker blood that is very high quality and can't find a comparative percentage of a different type, then you should get some resources; this will vastly facilitate whichever task you set yourself out to do. Kill tough enemies with strong fighting-based types, farm resources with gathering blood types, and explore with defensive ones; that way, you ensure you're the best at doing whatever it is you have the blood to do.

#4 — Check enemy blood quality before you kill them

Another seemingly obvious one, but you'll want to focus on what your enemy's blood type and quality is before you kill them; most notably, you'll want to focus on the latter.

There is nothing worse than fighting your way through groups of enemies with great blood types but letting your bloodlust get the best of you and not noticing that there is high-quality blood within that group. Make a habit out of checking their quality before killing them; don't worry about their type, as you'll soon enough learn that by memory.

#5 — Use your feast ability as an execute

After lowering the enemy's health to a certain point, you'll get the opportunity to feast on them to steal their blood and make it your own. At first, I avoided doing this at all costs because I was

worried I'd lose my blood type, but I soon realised (after doing it by accident and freaking out I'd lose high-quality blood) that you don't take their blood type right away.

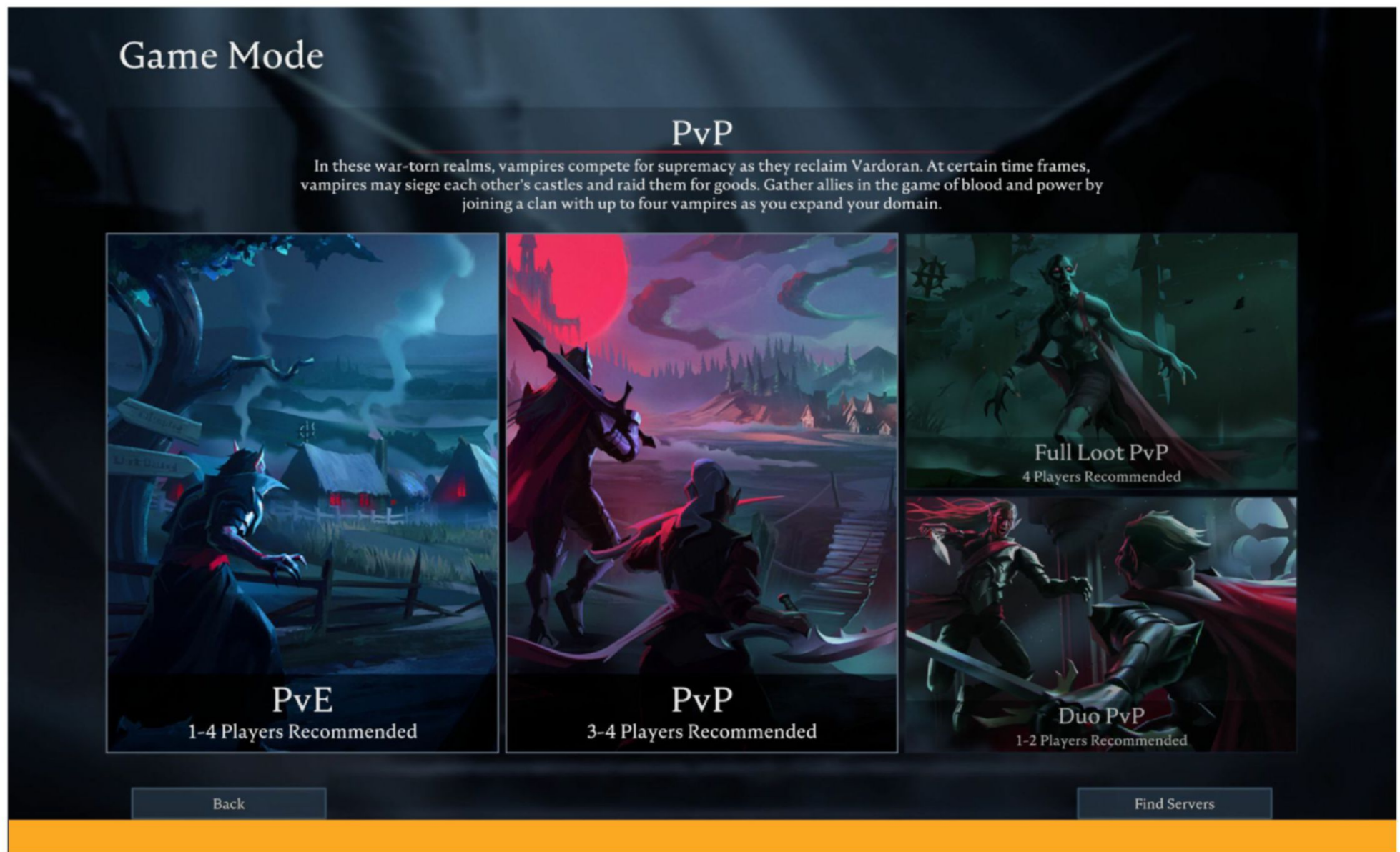
It's really useful to be able to fight through groups of enemies and chomp at their jugulars in order to execute them and dwindle their numbers. The fewer hits you have to give to any given enemy, the more you can focus on others equally deserving of your rage.

#6 — Position your castle smartly

It's easy to get very excited to start building your almighty castle of doom and death in the first place you find, but I'm here to advise you against that; you'll want to find a smart place for it.

Some things to look out for are:





- Make sure it's positioned near resources but not so near that it'll stop you from growing the castle itself.
- Make sure it's at a good point where you can run off to and come back easily; difficult castles to access can be deadly because of the sunlight.
- Make sure it's near bandit camps so you can go and farm resources through them such as bones, but also so you have an endless well of human blood to feast on.

Once you meet all of these requirements (or most), you'll be eternally (literally) grateful for the easy access to all of the above.

Bonus: When you open the map and hover over a bandit camp, you can check what items they drop

inside that camp; check for which ones have the highest number of resources and build your castle near them.

#7 — Play in PvE first

Unless you don't mind getting ganked, I'd advise against playing PvP on your first server because there is a big possibility you'll be inexperienced and face death at the hand of another vampire or a cauldron of vampires (get it?).

Once you're more accustomed to fighting, know where some of the V Blood enemies are, and which resources you'll need plenty of, you can safely enter PvP if you don't mind relinquishing numerous deaths to rogue vampires or clans of them.

#8 — Pay attention to the time

This one's easier said than done; not because the game hides this information from you, it doesn't, but because it's easy to lose track of time while going on a feasting rampage.

Truth is, if you lose track of time and the morning comes around, you'll face one of the game's deadliest foes: the Sun. As a vampire, your greatest weakness after garlic and the love of Jesus Christ is the Sun, and you'll need to hide in the shadows. Aside from combat being extremely difficult while hiding under a tree, this makes it incredibly challenging to be productive with your time, and it'll force you to hide until the night comes around. So instead, pay attention to the time, pay attention to how far away from your castle you are, and return when appropriate.

#9 — Save the hardest battles for blood moons

Blood moons increase the strength of your blood type exponentially, meaning that you'll gain plenty of benefit and power once one of these rolls around. If you are patient and don't mind waiting to fight the hard V Blood enemies for when there's a blood moon, you can (and should) wait it out to ensure you don't lose anything.

This is important because, if you're not confident you can kill your foe, you might lose a strong blood type and quality pair that could aid you throughout killing other foes. There is no shame in waiting and leaving another enemy alive while you wait for the blood moon to slay them.





#10 — Kill everything

See that pack of skeletons in the distance? Kill them. Do you see that band of ruffians and rascals? Annihilate them. Do you see Bambi's mom? Eat her. Everything you do, despite V Rising not having an XP system, will work towards something greater. No resource that an enemy drops is useless, and you'll want to have an overabundance of everything.

Unlike wood and stone, you can't set out on an adventure and find a plethora of bones naturally. Killing everything ensures that you'll have all you'll

ever need to grow your castle or forge your armour.

Bonus: While you're at it, just gather pretty much everything. You can never have too much wood or stone, and preferably you have too many rather than have to waste part of a night gathering resources when that wasn't your main intention in the first place.

That's it for all of my tips and tricks, little batling. I have faith that, in no time, you'll do your blood-feasting ancestors proud. Now, in the name of Vladimir Dracula, go and genocide! ■



So I Tried... Skate 3

By Jamie Davies

Jamie tried Skate 3



Each edition of So I Tried... I will try a game that I have never tried before. Will I find something new to love? Will I find something new to despise? I'll take a full half-hour, no matter how bad it gets or how badly I do, to see if this is the game for me. This time I went for the Xbox 360 version of Skate 3 (played on Xbox One).

What I thought it was

Growing up on Tony Hawk's games taught me that skateboards are, for all intents and purposes, wooden flying carpets; stepping onto one instantly gives a person the ability to perform miraculous acts of gravity-defying aerial acrobatics. The older I get, the more I suspect that—maybe—there are one or two elements of fantasy to this notion. I fully expected Skate 3 to take this inkling and smack me over the head with it until I was bloody, bruised and begging for

the warm embrace of Tony Hawk's Pro Skater and its multi-dozen trick combos. I expected a simulation, one that would seem, frankly, a little off-putting to me and my Pro Skater sensibilities.

I was also vaguely familiar with Skate 3's right analogue stick-based trick system; this wasn't inherently alarming to me. Having played Olli-Olli, which adopts a similar system, I felt confident in my ability to navigate that particular learning curve without too much difficulty. "Too much" being the key phrase here. It still was going to be far from easy—I knew THAT much.

What it actually is

Very much the kind of simulation I was expecting, at least in gameplay terms. The aforementioned right stick-based trick system, indeed, wasn't a world apart from Olli Olli's arcadey skating shenanigans, but it was far less

snappy. The character too was far weightier than any other skating game I'd played before, and my own created character, Billy Stankwater, suffered as a result. In just half an hour, he fell victim to enough misjudged ollies and overzealous stunts to fill up an entire 'skating bail compilation' YouTube video. Just like real skating, it takes a lot of practise to achieve anything other than sucking. Needless to say, I was terrible, but my constant failures made the precious few victories genuinely rewarding. Oh, and when I say "victory", I do just mean "successfully pulling off any trick other than any ollie".

Tonally, Skate 3 took me by surprise. For all its merciless gameplay and realistic physics, the game's unashamedly goofy as hell. The opening cutscene (filmed in live action) dives straight into the silliness with what's essentially a montage of real-life skating figures goofing around a pretend construction site. It's fun and feels shockingly earnest from a company like EA. The entire cutscene serves as a great "hey, don't take any of

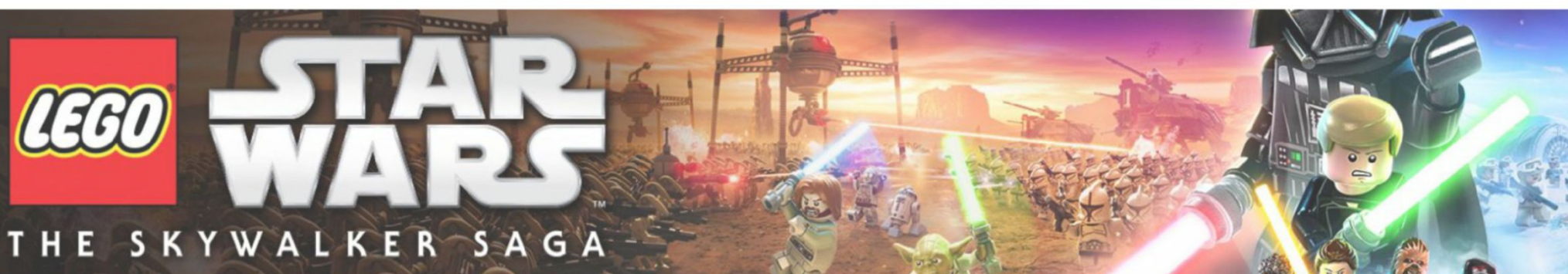
this too seriously because we sure won't" disclaimer.

Will I keep playing

Oh definitely! I don't much care for the 'selling skateboards' story setup, but as long as the focus remains on kickflipping the boards and not, just... flipping them, I'm happy to ride this one out. I haven't exhausted my energy with Skate 3 in a mere half an hour. While these eyes may never see credits, they're certainly ready to witness a lot more of what this game has to offer.

I'm hoping for more complex mission objectives, more customisation options and a lot more of Coach Frank (the tutorial character voiced by My Name is Earl star, Jason Lee). With any combination of these three, I can't see Skate 3 disappearing from my Xbox One hard drive any time soon. That is, until Skate 4 comes out... whenever that might be. ■

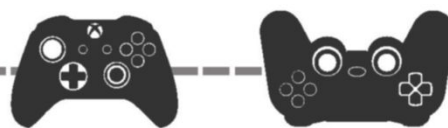




5 Tips & Tricks for LEGO Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga

By Samiee Tee

Samiee has some tips



After several years in development, LEGO Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga is out, promising several hours of gameplay alongside the nine mainline films, with several angles for replayability. Not only that, but the game also hosts new open-world playgrounds based on popular planets in the Star Wars universe. Whether you're a first-timer or a veteran returning, consider this handy guide for your return to the LEGO fray, detailing several tidbits that you may gloss over in your first playthrough.

1. Use The Force (No, Really)

LEGO Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga has revamped how it views the characters, categorising them in classes that will have you utilising their abilities on the fly. Whether it's using the Bounty Hunter characters' weaponry to destroy golden boxes or

using a Scavenger's crafting ability to create weapons that unlock new parts of the environment, there are a lot of options here to help you with general gameplay and collecting Kyber Bricks. It's the latter that will be testing you, due to their importance in upgrading the skill trees for character classes, along with their tricky locations in the overworld.

One of the most common solutions to these trials, however, is using the Force. Playing as one of the many Jedi characters should be a given, but many smaller droids, like R2-D2 and BB-8, can be picked up by using the Force to place them onto higher areas. What you can do for certain Kyber Brick locations is to have one character as a Jedi, and another as a smaller droid, pick the droid up using the Force, and then when they're in the air? Quickly let go of them and switch to them so it counts as

you collecting the Kyber Brick. It's a magnificently helpful shortcut in order to help you speed up collecting these multitudes of bricks.

2. Play The New Trilogy First

With a film franchise as culturally revered as Star Wars, certain people will have personal preferences when it comes to how they'll approach it. Older players may play Episodes IV, V, and VI first due to the nostalgia factor, but younger players may find more solace in Episodes I, II, and III. For my money, however, I would heartily recommend playing Episodes VII, VIII, and IX first.

Despite every episode getting a new coat of paint and a semi-open world status, *The Last Jedi* and *Rise of Skywalker* being put through the LEGO

game filter for the first time should be enough. It's exciting to see just how TT Games has structured the movie's most pivotal moments, but it has also used these Episodes as a learning curve. Both these two films and *The Force Awakens* display feature-heavy tutorials that explore all of the new elements that the previous six films and their levels do not.

Based on that alone, it might make the most sense to play the new trilogy first, if not for the encouragement to try out new mechanics, then because it might make *Rise of Skywalker* that much more bearable.

3. It's Okay to Miss Things

The LEGO games have always prided themselves on their replayability, and *The Skywalker Saga* is no **»**





exception, despite its rather intimidating size. While the large maps of the several planets will have their own challenges for you to contend with, it's the mainline story missions which will hone in on that replayability. Whether it's for the Microkits, or the side-objectives — both of which will aid in your collection of Kyber Bricks — you're never going to get everything on the first try.

It is an incredibly mischievous gameplay loop, but at the same time, incredibly encouraging. The new character classes will incentivise variety that much more, not just searching every nook and cranny for one piece of a Microkit. It helps to keep the pacing at that upbeat tempo while you're dosing around and breaking every possible LEGO structure in order to get as many Studs as possible. So don't worry if you find a Microkit in a level that requires

abilities that none of your characters have, just unlock the option for Free Play and go back with a fresh set of legs.

4. Be Careful What You Upgrade

This is a tip that may fall under personal preference, but one thing you'll notice about The Skywalker Saga is how centralised the action is. The HUD elements do really well to keep the unnecessary information out of the constant LEGO money shots, even if you don't tinker with the display options. With that said, the display options don't account for one of the upgrades which can ruin the visual clarity of your gameplay.

Beyond the several character classes you can upgrade, there are also core upgrades which will

aid you, regardless of who you play as. These can range from simple health increases to increased damage with blasters and lightsabers. There is also one upgrade you can acquire early on which will highlight the location of every Kyber Brick, Datacard, and Microkit in your general vicinity on your screen. As stated in our review, this can and will make your screen an almost unreadable mess of blue lights, notification icons, and waypoint arrows which, as we noted then, you have no way of turning off.

Keep that in mind while you continue to play, because even though it may be a godsend in late-game activity, it will bog down your experience if you're stuck with it early on.

5. Mute That Music, If Needs Be

With the return of a classic LEGO game, it's almost certain that everyone will want to show off what they can do in The Skywalker Saga. It could be

fancy tricks you've learned, or Easter eggs you've found, maybe even a full series speedrun. These are legitimate sources of content that people will want to create for a product they love, and as such, you'll see it played on YouTube and Twitch, and you can join in on the fun.

If you're someone who is looking to create video content for The Skywalker Saga, then more power to you; just remember to mute that iconic score from John Williams before you do so. Whilst TT Game is ecstatic to see its game reach as many people as possible, the copyright bots that prowl YouTube and Twitch like the Sentinels from The Matrix? They'll take down your video content faster than you can say "Wait, it's ACTUALLY called 'Jizz Music?'".

There you have it! A quick handy guide ready to prepare you for the depths of Tatooine, Dagobah, so on and so forth. . ■



Reset

Kyle Prepared
by Being a Nudist

Return to
Menu

Is Kyle is Famous Any Good?

By Bex Prouse

Bex wondered what the deal was



Every now and then, you'll look at a game store page and see that it's got pretty good reviews, and you'll wonder if it's actually any good. Well, I decided to play Kyle is Famous and see if it lived up to the Very Positive user reviews on Steam.

What is Kyle Is Famous?

Released in November 2019, Kyle is Famous has been described as an un-visual novel by its creator, John Szymanski. Narrated by Gianni Matragano, you play as Kyle, who is described as a popular and most excellent dumpy little white man who is also a highly famous TV presenter. Viewers tune in daily to watch his show, "Staying Up Late with Kyle," and many have been inspired to pursue careers in STEM fields by watching him.

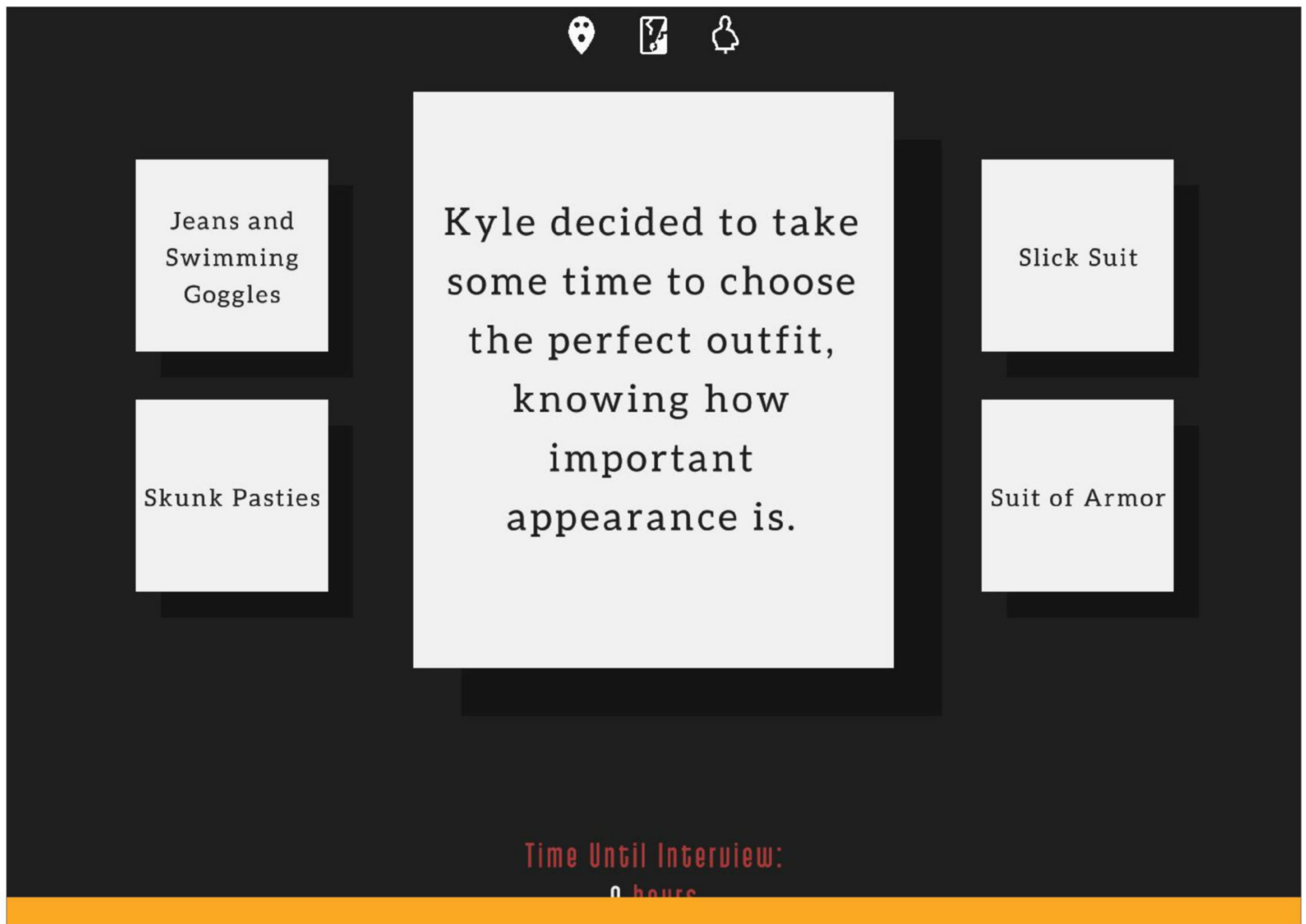
In this game, Kyle has 30 hours to prepare for an interview with the lovely philanthropist, Rachel

May. Of course, all decisions are made at the player's discretion and all of them end in a different comedic way. This is pretty impressive considering the 117 endings available.

What are the people saying?

Generally, Kyle Is Famous has received a number of recommended reviews on Steam. Reviewers have praised the comedy and the number of story routes available for the players. Many players were originally introduced through the free version available, and then were gripped enough to buy the complete edition to find out what happened next.

Of course, there is also a small bug when someone buys the complete edition, and it claims that you only own the free edition. But aside from this, reviews have overall been very positive.



Is it actually any good?

I spent seven hours playing this game, and I can safely say it was absolutely worth it. The humour hit impeccably well, and while before I would have thought this was a “Groundhog Day” situation where the day repeats as normal, that isn’t the case; In fact, each playthrough, certain elements are remembered. For example, I broke my phone earlier on and wasn’t able to use a phone again until I completed the Detective run.

The fact that each character left such a lasting impression is a testament to the writing and the narration of this game. I can’t deny, Gianni Matragano changing his voice for each character

really made it feel like the story was being read aloud to me as I played. Even the limited music changes were a nice touch, specifically the Jam Man.

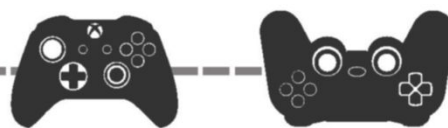
So if you have a few hours to spare, and want to try this one out, then head onto Steam where there’s a free edition available. Or, if you want the complete edition (which is also on Steam), you could even download it onto your Nintendo Switch.■



Beginner's Guide to Monster Hunter Rise: Sunbreak

By Dylan Pamintuan

If you've just picked up Monster Hunter Rise: Sunbreak, Dylan has the perfect introduction for you



So, you've defeated Thunder Serpent Narwa, hunted Daimyo Hermitaur, and have just arrived at Elgado Outpost. Congratulations, you are officially a Master Rank Hunter! But now you're in a new area with new people to know and

new systems to get used to, and it can feel a little overwhelming. Fear not, my dear hunter, as this article will give you a little head start and help you get ready for whatever Master Rank is going to throw at you.





Take it slow

Don't rush through Master Rank. You'll be woefully unprepared for late game.

You've probably done this twice before but now let's do it a third time. All the old maps have new materials and endemic life, while the new maps are covered in fog so there are tons of little secrets to discover. Take your time and go on an Expedition Tour. Gather any materials you can and slay any small monsters you come across. They all have better crafting materials for better armour and weapons and your High Rank gear is going to be rendered obsolete sooner rather than later, plus the armour sets available at the start are vastly more powerful than whatever set you used to beat Narwa. Heck, there are some weapons that can't be forged in Master Rank so you might want to go back and hunt High/Low Rank monsters. There are

also a ton of Side Quests that unlock some really useful stuff, so keep them in mind when you accept a quest. Here's a tip: if you see dandelions floating around a particular spot, that is a once-per-quest fast travel point and you will need to manually unlock it. Go up to it and hit the confirm button.

Practice Switch Skill Swap

Customise and master your fighting styles.

One of the main new features this DLC offers is Switch Skill Swap, allowing you to have two completely different fighting styles you can switch between with a quick button command. You'll unlock it after a mandatory Training Quest, but I highly recommend using that time and the Arzueros that spawns to get used to the system. It feels weird at first but once you learn when to use it and customise your Switch Skill loadout to your tastes, you'll be hunting twice as efficiently. Remember,

the red scroll is your default set and what you start out with in hunts, and you'll unlock more moves as you go through Master Rank.

Choose your dango wisely

A good hunter checks the Skill Info before they eat.

Eating before a hunt has become a little more complex. All Dango skills have levels now, and by activating Hopping Skewers at the Canteen, you can increase or decrease the levels of those skills depending on what order you choose your dango. Be sure to read the Skill Info if you're unsure of anything, and see if it's worth using Hopping Skewers or sticking with the Level 2 versions. Just make sure to use Dango Tickets to subvert any decreased chances of activating skills.

Take care of your Buddies

They're a lot more valuable in your hunts in Master Rank.

Your Palicos and Palamutes have got some really cool things to play around with. Bring a Palamute on a quest, and you get a second inventory and the Sniff 'Em Out command, which pinpoints materials on the map. Meanwhile, Palicos get Secret Support Moves once you complete certain requests. They range from regenerating health and elemental mines to fireworks bombs and Kittenators. Make sure to complete these Side Quests as you get through Master Rank while keeping your Buddies' levels and equipment updated. They are massive assets to your hunts and will make your life a little easier.





Do Follower Quests

Get to know the NPCs of Kamura and Elgado.

Once you reach MR2 and unlock Follower Quests, go and do them as soon as you can. While entirely optional, completing these quests will unlock a ton of cool rewards like new armour sets and weapons. Plus, some Follower Quests give you access to areas that aren't available for an Expedition Tour yet, so

take advantage of that and do some gathering while you're out there.

These are only some things you have to keep in mind while playing through the Sunbreak expansion. I haven't covered everything it has to offer, but it's best to stop reading this article and go and experience it yourself! The Monster Hunter Rise: Sunbreak expansion is available on Steam and the Nintendo Switch. ■



Double Take: MultiVersus

By Retro Dawn

Alana & Artura had a take each

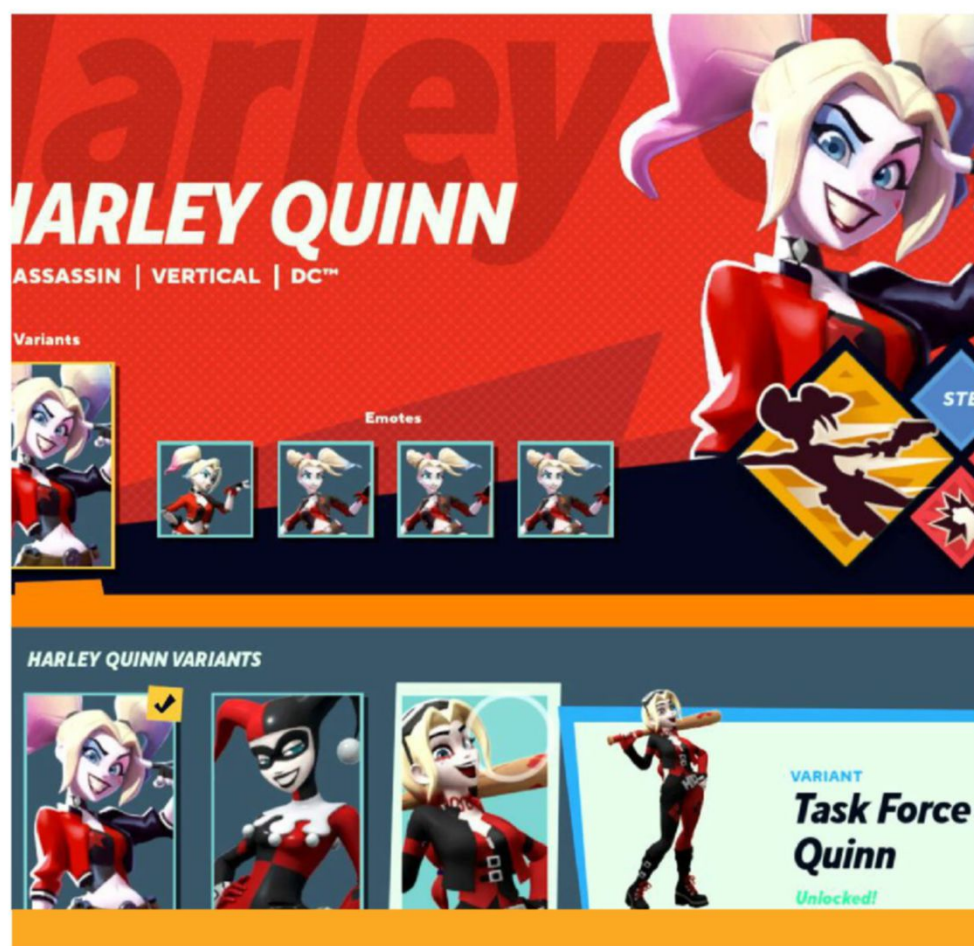


Alana (aka retrogamergirl) and Artura Dawn (Retro Dawn) have teamed up to check out a demo for a new game coming to Steam. Did the demo leave them wanting more or did it make them want to move on to the next thing?

Today Retro Dawn is doing a Double Take of MultiVersus.

Retro: We finally have time to check out a title together at the same time! It's amazingly hard to coordinate sometimes! The other day I saw that there was an Alpha test available to sign up for the chance to try out the new Warner Bros. fighting game called MultiVersus. This game pits characters from multiple WB properties against each other in a Smash Bros. type brawl. I have always been a fan of Looney Tunes, and the animated DC superhero movies are pretty good, so I was curious to see if this would bring anything new to the fighter game table that we haven't seen before.

The day after signing up for the Alpha, I was lucky enough to receive a code, and with that, you had a chance to receive up to three other codes to give to whoever you wanted. After speaking with Artura, I knew this game would be a great one to do a double-take article on. One of the most exciting parts is the option to do cross-platform multiplayer. The Alpha didn't have local multiplayer available,





but by putting the game on two different systems, you could still have a local battle; in my house, the Xbox One and the PS4 both have the game installed. Plus, this also gave me the option to play against Artura and Spooky_one online!

Looking at the roster of characters, it looks like a crazy mix of characters you would never expect to see together; Shaggy and Velma from Scooby-Doo, Bugs Bunny and Taz, Steven from Steven Universe, Arya from Game of Thrones, and superheroes Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman are just some of the available characters to check out. I thought that there was no way that Shaggy would be able to hold his own against someone like Wonder Woman, but I was pleasantly surprised! Each character has their own unique attacks that are true to their character, like Shaggy throwing sandwiches and Taz sprinkles salt and pepper on his opponents getting ready for a snack. I've recently seen a leaked list of characters that may

appear in the full game once it's released; I have to say I will be super excited if Godzilla is a playable fighter!

The graphics in the game look really nice, and the characters, even if they are traditionally 2D, look like themselves and not creepy 3D models. The colours are bright, and the few stages we got to try out looked really cool too. When I was playing by myself against a bot, the game wasn't laggy at all, but once I was playing online against Artura and Spooky_one we did experience moments of lag, so hopefully, that will be resolved before the full game is released. Though I have to say having a battle with the three of us and the bot all playing as Wonder Woman was pretty awesome and not as confusing as I had expected. The game has the character you are playing as displayed as normal, but your opponents have a red tint to them, making it easy to spot where your enemies are.



The controls for the game were very easy to learn, with no difficult combos and if you haven't played the game before or haven't put in much time, you will be able to jump into a battle with your friends and still have fun. This is exactly the case when I battled online, they had played the game for hours and I had only completed the basic tutorial; I thought I would get destroyed! I was actually able to hold my own and even win a couple of the battles; I guess all my years mastering button-mashing really paid off!

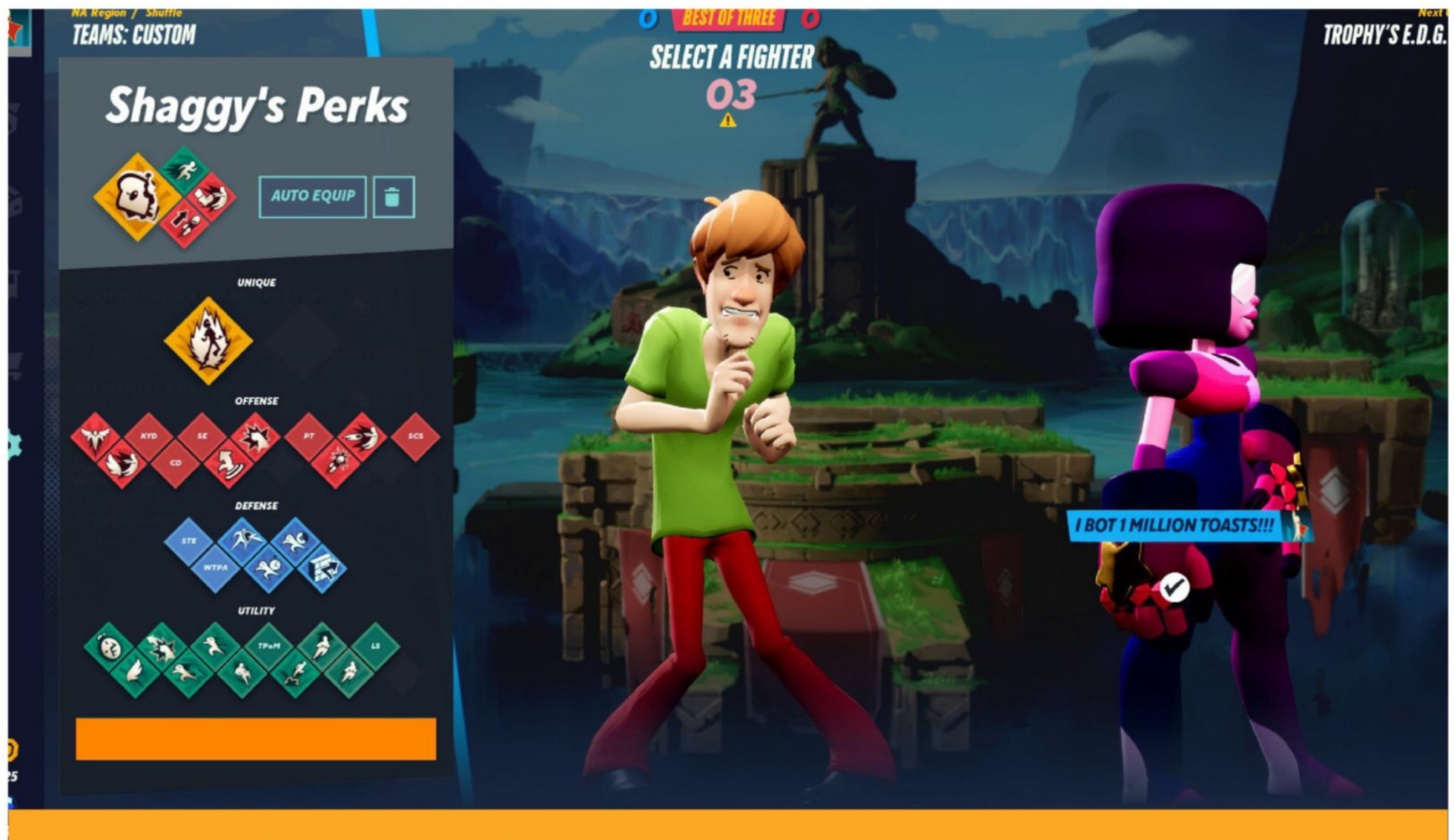
One of my favourite things was being able to play on the console of my choosing. I love Smash Bros. on the Switch, don't get me wrong, but if you are playing with multiple people you can't all have the Switch Pro controller and you are stuck using the

Joy-Cons, these are definitely not my controller of choice. I enjoy using the controllers for the Xbox and PlayStation 4 a lot more so I was very excited!

I had a great time playing MultiVersus, and I can't wait until the full game is released and I can battle against friends locally or online no matter where they are and what console they are using. Plus there is such a crazy mix of characters to battle with it will be fun to discover their unique attacks and how well they do against fighters from so many different franchises! This is definitely a must-play title for me, even if the rumours of Godzilla aren't true.

Artura: Welcome back to Double Take! I've been excited to do another one of these for a while, but





the truth is, I've been incredibly busy. Thankfully both retrogamergirl and I got to play through MultiVersus and see how we felt about this Smash Bros. competitor.

The Alpha test already had 15 characters to choose from, as you'll be able to play characters from the DC universe all the way to famous cartoons, such as Adventure Time. Having Shaggy beat the crap out of Superman with a sandwich while turning into ultra instinct was a wacky and fun experience. One of the characters I did not expect to see in the playtest was none other than Arya Stark from Game of Thrones, as it opened the possibility for other great characters to join the mix (I secretly hope Tyrion Lannister becomes playable)!

In my experience, after having played all of the characters numerous times to assure I had a good knowledge of them, they felt predominantly balanced. I didn't groan at the appearance of any

character (aside from Bugs Bunny, screw you, doc!). Despite most of them feeling balanced, I couldn't say for sure as one of the things I was most battling in MultiVersus was the lag.

Throughout my experience with the test, I couldn't enjoy a single round without excessive lag. Naturally, you could attribute this to me being located in Colombia, but even when playing in the South American region I couldn't get anything above a bar of connection. Foes teleported around, I couldn't see where I was going at times, and I'd die because I didn't know where the lag had teleported me to. I hope this was part of the test and not that I was an isolated incident, as I'd be heartbroken not to be able to play the game on its release!

Despite most characters feeling balanced, a trend started to set with the ones picked. Players seemed to love selecting Arya, Shaggy, and Garnet early, ➤



as Superman joined the roster of most-played characters shortly after that. Meanwhile, Reindog, Steven Universe, and Velma went predominantly unnoticed — possibly due to them being support roles. The most picked characters didn't fluctuate much between the modes, as they were picked equally between the 1v1, 2v2, and Free-For-All choices, but some characters did become more prominent, like Jake in 1v1.

Each character has a set of traits they can learn, along with being able to train new ones for gold after reaching mastery level 10. These traits increase your damage with certain abilities or offer defensive bonuses to some attacks, which was a good way to vary the playstyle. That said, however, it felt a bit lacking. The major trait for each of the

characters is supposed to change their playstyle so that you focus on one of the many ways to play them, but some weren't as great, while others felt pivotal, which could mean the difference between a balanced experience and dominating characters.

For the modes available, the playtest offered us the capability to play 1v1, 2v2, Free-For-All, Co-op vs AI, and Custom matches. I spent my first day in 1v1, most of my days playing 2v2s with my wife, and occasionally joined Free-For-All to get a taste of the game mode. 1v1 and 2v2 felt like the most balanced, though some characters lose their shine in 1v1, as MultiVersus was built around the 2v2 mode; characters like Reindog and Steven Universe felt almost impossible to use in these. This isn't a complaint in the slightest, as it makes sense that

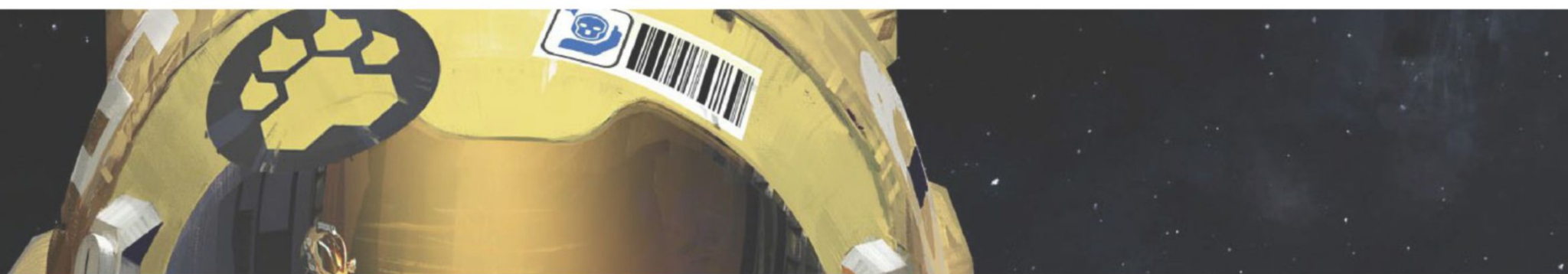
the game can't be balanced around all game modes, but rather informative. Now, the game mode that felt most disappointing was Free-For All. While 1v1 had two lives, 2v2 used a shared-stock system where players can die a total of four times, which was a great system that I didn't expect to love nearly as much as I did. Meanwhile, Free-For-All prioritises ringouts (taking life from your foe) as the main form of point gathering. While a player might have done the most damage, whoever killed the most won the round, encouraging a cowardly playstyle and stealing the kill from players.

Customs felt a bit limiting, especially for a mode called "custom". You can play between all of the

modes, but you can't actually choose how many players or any handicap options. This was MultiVersus' weakest point, as it doesn't really offer anything aside from "co-op vs AI"; I looked forward to fighting 1v2 against retrogamergirl and my wife, but that option wasn't available.

Despite that, however, MultiVersus is a phenomenal game, and easily one of my favourite releases for 2022 already. I had a lot of fun throughout my playtime, and I cannot wait to be able to play more! retrogamergirl gave me a run for my money when we fought, but next time she won't have that same luxury. See you on the battlefield, retro!. ■





Hardspace: Shipbreaker Tips

By Andrew Duncan

Andrew has some tips



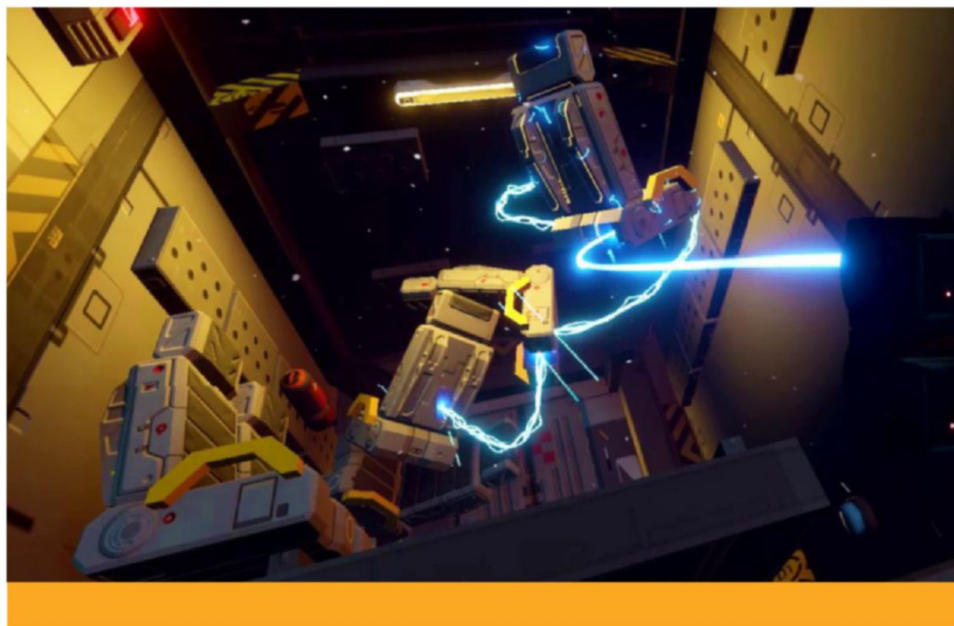
Having logged over 60 hours in space and wiped millions off of my debt in Hardspace: Shipbreaker over its Early Access period, I eagerly checked out the final release version. If not to finally free myself of debt to LYNX, then at least to pass along my “expert” knowledge so that you can pay off yours. With an additional 20+ hours in space, here's what I've come up with.

Look around the ship before you cut anything

Most of the ships you are going to encounter will have sealed airlocks. That means you've got plenty of oxygen since your personal supply won't deplete while you're inside the ship. So, make sure you take your time and plan ahead. Shut off fuel lines, locate any spare oxygen tanks for later use, and open all of the airlocks once you've depressurised the ship.

Almost anything will fit with enough tethers

There are some things that your cutting tool simply won't damage, and that's fine so long as you have tethers. Attach enough to something and it will fit into one of the processing areas. And if you can't get the angle to make something fit, cancel the tethers and then make more tethers aiming to get it into the processing area opposite! That's why there are two of each!



Take your time

I know this is technically a rehash of the first point, but so long as you're clearing enough salvage to offset your debt, then you're fine. If your debt is increasing by 800,000 credits per shift, just clear 1,000,000 credits worth of salvage! If it takes you three shifts to properly slice up a ship, then it takes you three shifts; cutting corners will just make your debt increase, because cloned spare bodies are not cheap!

The Guardian Cut

Something mentioned off-handedly by one of your team members is that you should "use a Guardian Cut" as it has saved them several times. However,

you're never told what that actually is! They offer to show it to you, but never follow through. So let me explain it: make an asterisk pattern with your cutting tool. When you cut into a pressurised area you get explosive decompression as air escapes through the hole you made. Whether done by accident or on purpose, as soon as that alarm goes off you need to make at least two more cuts at angles to the original one that intersect with it. If you can manage more, great, if not, then you're probably going to have to repair your spacesuit or print a spare body.

Hopefully those help you get the most out of your shift. Now go out there and make LYNX Corporation's profits soar! ■





Let's Play Play Next on Steam: Lovers of Aether

By Erin McAllister

Erin tries a game she hasn't played yet



I've been using Steam for a while (nine years as of the 20th of August, according to my "Years of Service" badge), but there are a few features that I've hardly used. One of these is Steam Play Next, a little, supposedly-helpful tool that recommends unplayed titles in a given user's library which the service believes that user will "love". Given that I am one Steam user with... shall we say a teensy bit of a backlog, I thought using this service could be a good way to cut back on my ever-growing supply of unplayed games. And by writing up a series of each of these new experiences, we can start to test this system and see how well it knows me! Will these games be sleeper hits or overblown snoozers? Come and let's play Play Next!

Lovers of Aether

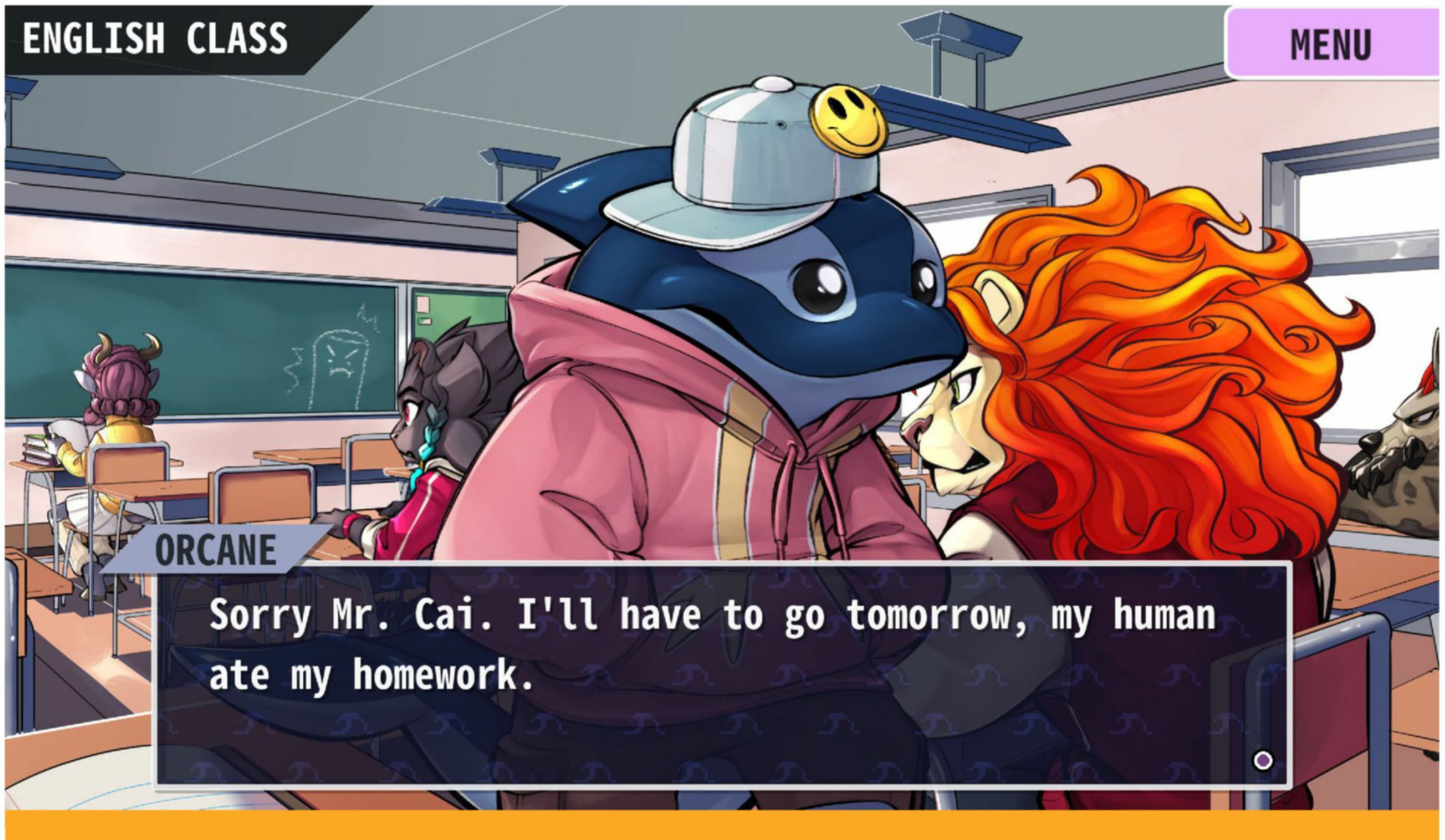
First on my list of new experiences is a little free-to-play visual novel and dating simulator by the title of

Lovers of Aether, from lead developer Dan Fornace. Lovers of Aether was released three years ago on the 1st of April as a joke reimagining of the popular fighting game Rivals of Aether from the same developers. This might sound like a strange



ENGLISH CLASS

MENU



direction for a fighting game, but to be honest, a group of distinct and well-defined characters with unique designs works just as well for a dating sim. Plus, given that Tyler Schurwan gave the original release of *Rivals of Aether* a score of 10/10, there's a decent chance that *Lovers* will turn out pretty okay.

For the purposes of this article, I gave the game one run-through and decided that I should bring some friends along for the experience. A few nights ago, I was hanging out with those friends online and we decided to play through a visual novel, so it was the perfect opportunity to try out *Lovers of Aether*. What seemed to pique my friends' interest first was the fact that the entire cast was made up of anthropomorphic creatures, with some members of our group wanting us to pursue the character Orcane, an orca with paws, because his design reminded them of the DC character King Shark. His fantastic appearance — as well as all the

other characters' — was brought to life by character illustrator El Ranno.

Friends at hand, I opened the game and was immediately impressed by the soundtrack from composer flashygoodness. With a good array of synth and chiptune tracks, every moment in *Lovers of Aether* is underscored with the perfect music for the occasion. Thankfully, the full soundtrack is available to be listened to right there on the main menu, so I was quickly able to find my favourite tracks, like the PC-98 Remix of "Fight and Flight".

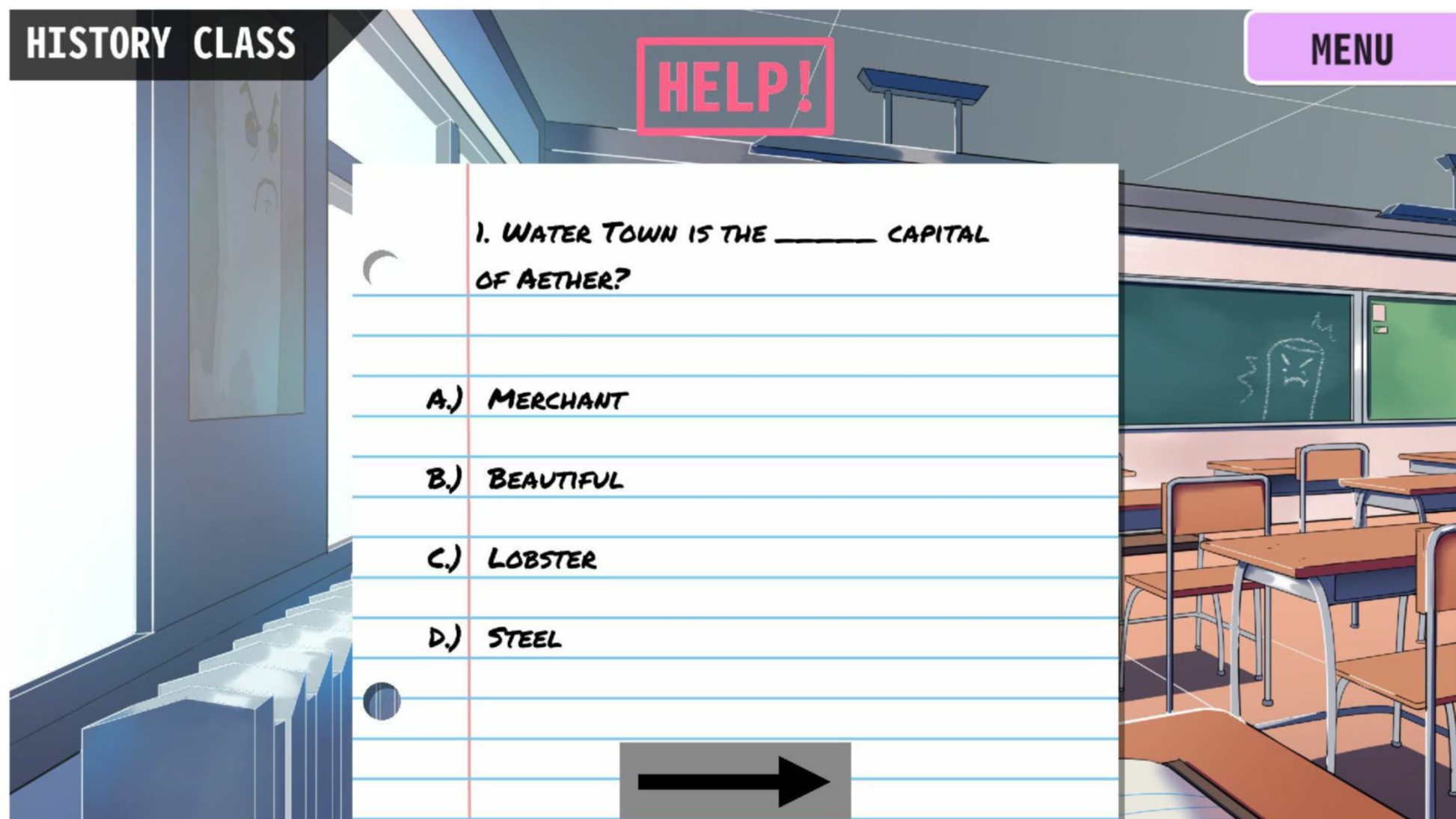
With the power of music behind us, we were ready to start a new playthrough! Curiously, a little pop-up came forward warning us that starting a new game would override a previous checkpoint, even though I had never played before. Theoretically, this is just a general warning, but it was still slightly surprising. Once in the game proper, we were introduced to Aether High — a classic choice of

setting for dating sims — and the new, more dateable versions of Rival's fighters, reimagined as our classmates. The story began with us talking to our good friend Zetterburn, a lion with a burning mane whose name we kept forgetting. He seemed very likeable, but also quite attached to the school itself, so we decided not to get in the way of his burgeoning romance. Soon after that, we learned of our ultimate goal: Asking one of these fine students out to the Homecoming Dance.

We started out trying to get to know three of our potential partners: Orcane (because we liked his design), Maypul (a ferret-raccoon hybrid and my personal choice, because she had just declared herself Class President For Life and I was interested in learning more), and Forsburn (because we were intrigued that our good friend Zetterburn had a brother). Orcane wound up being a bit of a trickster, popping a water bubble over Forsburn's head, but he didn't really hold our interest for very

long. Maypul was more interesting, a strangely over-competent class president that took everything way too seriously. I knew I wanted to learn more, but my friends weren't terribly keen on actually dating her, so we moved on. But Forsburn was just right. Or, should I say, write. Instead of chatting with us, the emo-styled, fire-maned hyena read us a series of his own poems. They started out somewhat short and poorly-written, but slowly became longer and somewhat more thought out, though often retaining an edgy and hilariously simple bent. We had found the one!

Throughout the remainder of the game, we got to know Forsburn and the rest of the cast a little bit more, chatting everyone up between classes and while waiting for lectures to begin. We learned that Forsburn had a poor relationship with his father — exemplified by one line in a later poem, "Dads just don't get it", — and that he thought of his brother as a bit of a dumb jock. Throughout these





moments, we were consistently impressed by the character writing (penned by Eric Shumaker), as each of our dating prospects felt uniquely interesting and often hilarious.

As a brief side note that will become somewhat important later, one thing that my friends and I like to do when playing dating sims like this is to voice some of the characters ourselves and, wouldn't you know it, I wound up voicing Forsburn! I went with this Christian Bale Batman-esque tone that was probably a poor choice for my vocal chords, as I found myself really needing a couple of drinks of water before the end of the game — though my favourite voice there was a kinda nasally "cool-guy" style I did for this birdlike person named Wrastor.

In between all of these conversations, we actually had to do some schoolwork as well. There was a test on basic facts about the game world (which we only got half right, an impressive feat for three

people that hadn't even heard of the original game before now), a presentation on a book that we hadn't read (which we got an A+ on... somehow?), and a videogame where you have to break various falling objects à la Breakout. Probably my favourite part of Lovers of Aether came from that brief minigame, as my failed attempts at making it through all three levels coincided with a long monologue from Forsburn. I can honestly say that I've never tried to beat a minigame like that while also delivering a funny monologue in a Batman voice about why school sucks. I know that the whole "voicing the characters" bit was just our own invention, but I still fell in love with the game anyway.

Thankfully, Forsburn fell in love with us in the end too, in a deliciously awkward moment where he was asking us out to the dance at the same time as we were asking him the same. I was a little disappointed that there wasn't a scene at the actua▶▶

dance with Forsburn, but seeing the big “CONGRATULATIONS” screen was enough for us.

Was Steam Play Next Correct?

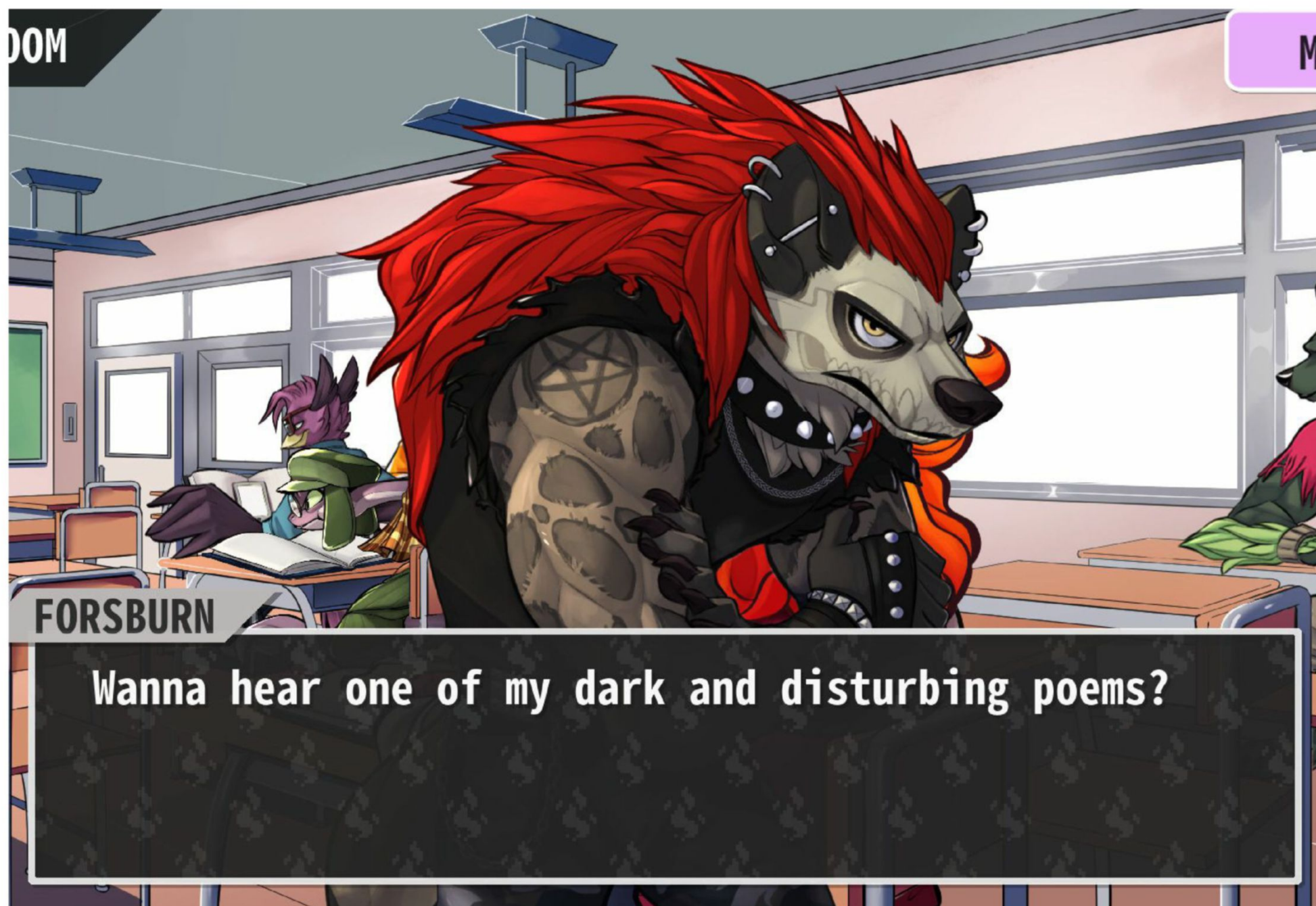
So was Lovers of Aether a good pick on Steam Play Next's part? Yes. Absolutely, yes! It wasn't a terribly long experience, with our leisurely playthrough clocking out at roughly an hour and a half, and every second was a joy to experience. There are a handful of quality-of-life features that are absent, such as a skip text option, but the game is funny enough to make up for that.

That's one point for Steam Play Next, but will they be able to keep up the pace?

Running Tally

We're just starting, but this gives Steam Play Next a score of 1:0 (Win:Loss)!

I'll be playing Seduce Me the Otome next time, another free dating sim. You'll have to get used to that, as these sorts of games make up the majority of my Play Next catalogue, but perhaps someone else will beat me to the punch and start to clear out their own Steam Library? ■





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So I Tried... Double Dragon: Neon

By Josh Vale

Josh tried Double Dragon Neon



Each edition of So I Tried... I will try a game that I have never tried before. Will I find something new to love? Will I find something new to despise? I'll take a full half-hour, no matter how bad it gets or how badly I do, to see if this is the game for me. This time I went for the PC version of Double Dragon Neon.

What I thought it was

I'll be honest, I'm mostly expecting a shiny version of the old games. It'll almost definitely be a lot more visually interesting because technology has come a far way since the original Double Dragon games. Due to its 2012 release year, I'm hoping there'll be a lack of the modern-day trappings we've come to love and hate, oh, and almost definitely more balance. The old games were kind of brutal, which, if Double Dragon Neon is as brutal, I can see myself bouncing straight off it because if I'm not making

progress in a game like this, I'm just going to give up on it. I've thought about giving Double Dragon Neon a shot for a few years now. Hell, I don't even remember buying it, but it's sat in my Steam library. Let's see how 30 minutes of it feels and whether I'll come back to it after this is over!

What it actually is

Turns out I wasn't massively off in terms of gameplay, though there are some interesting additions that I didn't predict. Magic is a thing in Double Dragon Neon, with your character having the ability to shoot off fireballs, and various other magical and non-magical techniques. Not only that, but you can equip various archetypes that change your stats, making you tankier, increase your magical prowess, as well as various other changes. If you told me Double Dragon would have stats and abilities, I'd never have believed you.

Shockingly, my first run through the first level of Double Dragon Neon ended in disaster. I died before long and realised that maybe just mashing my head against the controller wouldn't work out in the end. The combat is mostly what you'd expect from a beat 'em up, mash button until your enemy is knocked down, rinse and repeat. It's simple, but it's satisfying and there's a nuance. You have to make sure you're rolling away just before you get hit, as sometimes you can't put an enemy into stun before they hit you.

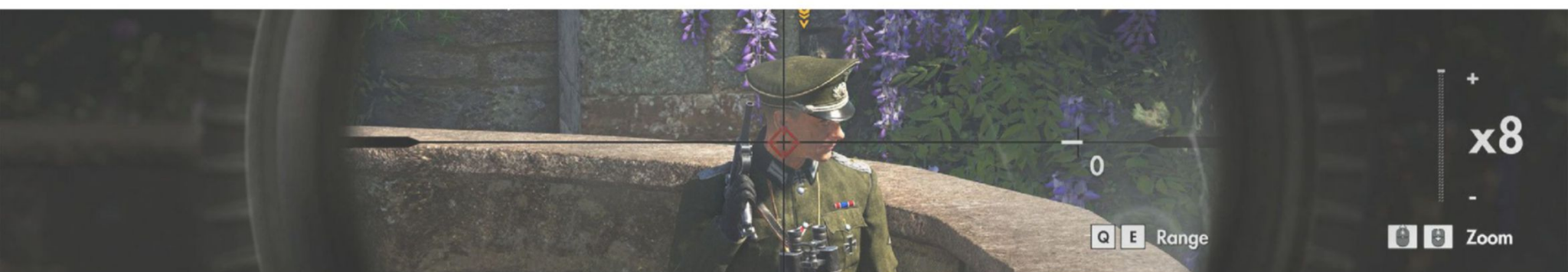
Aesthetically, it's '80s all the way. An era that I've not experienced first hand, due to being a '90s baby, but I've always thought the over the top colours were a strong vibe. Though, maybe I could've guessed the '80s vibe via the Neon part

of Double Dragon Neon. Musically, the soundtrack is pure '80s goodness. You've got that sweet hair metal vibe. One of the things I enjoyed the most was a homage to Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventures when you complete a level.

Will I keep playing

I imagine I'll probably pop back to finish it off Double Dragon Neon at some point. Sometimes you need a random game to just pop on while you think about writing an article and I feel like Double Dragon Neon could be that palate cleanser. It's an enjoyable game that you don't really need to engage your brain too much to enjoy and, with the way the world is at the moment, maybe that's what you need. ■





Sniper Elite 5: How to Accomplish All Kill Challenges

By Mike Crewe

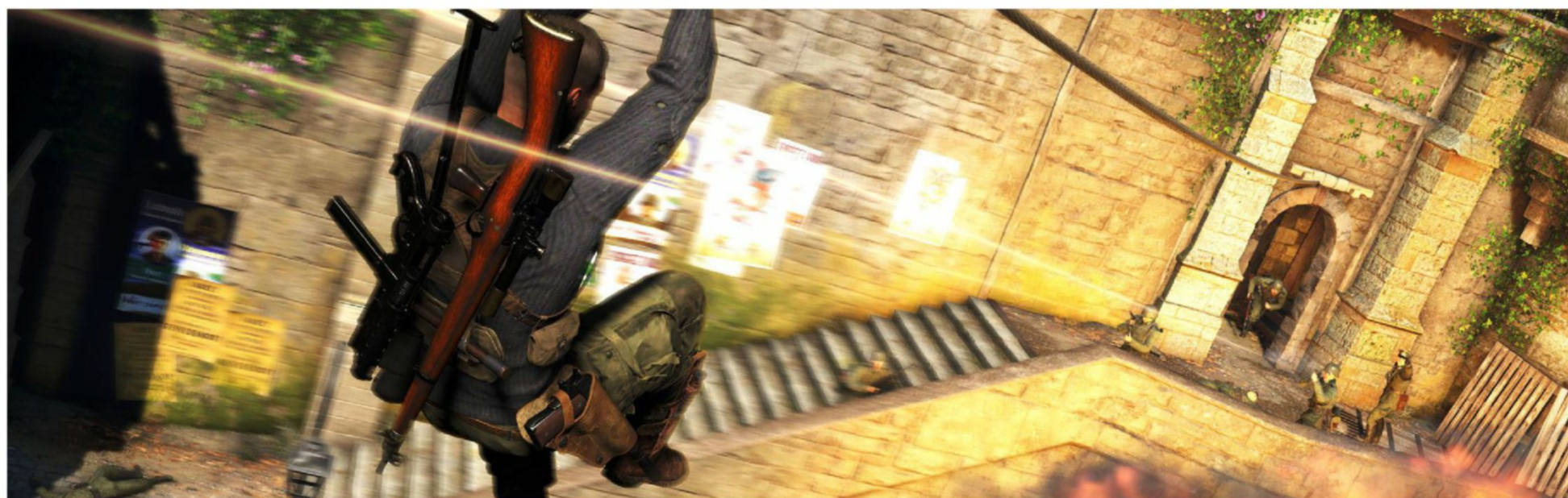
Mike gives us the rundown on Sniper Elite 5's Challenge Kills



Sniper Elite 5 isn't just about headshotting a small army's worth of Nazis, oh no. There are actually many different ways to dispatch them and the game includes a set of challenges based on inventive ways to kill key targets. You'll earn a new weapon for each of the eight challenges, so let's dive in and unleash our creative side, shall we?

Mission 1 Kill Challenge: Kill Steffen Beckendorf with an Explosion

On the western side of the map you'll find a town. Driving around this town will be our friend Steffen, and once his location has been marked it's up to you to decide what your explosive method of choice will be.





I set a few proximity mines down, but a well-timed grenade will work just as well, as he will occasionally park up, allowing you a quick and easy kill.

Unlocks: Machine Pist.40. A submachine gun with decent control and a fairly sizeable magazine!

Mission 2 Kill Challenge: Kill Friedrich Kummeler with a Chandelier

Located on the east side of the chateau, Kummeler can be found wandering around the grand ballroom. When you find him you just have to play the waiting game, and snipe the chain holding up the chandelier once he's stood underneath. If you

find him straying away from where you need him to be, try throwing a bottle to get his attention!

Alternatively, knock the poor guy out and place him underneath the chandelier before shooting it down. Simple!

Unlocks: Karabiner 98. A powerful sniper rifle with the tradeoff of having a low rate of fire.

Mission 3 Kill Challenge: Kill Fabian Richter Using a Stealth Takedown

One of the more complex kill challenges, taking down Richter with a melee stealth attack — whilst he's constantly being shadowed by other enemies — is no simple task! First you have to reach him ➤

(he's one of the key targets in this mission so he's easy to find) without being detected. So save often, and maybe attempt this after playing through the level once or twice.

Now, upstairs in the chapel you'll find a guard patrolling on a balcony. Take him out and loot him to gain the key to the room Richter is in. Get inside and stay out of sight until everyone inside has finished talking, and get ready to act fast! Richter will be at the back of the group as they begin to leave, giving you just enough time to creep up and stick a knife in the guy!

Unlocks: Pistole 08. A powerful pistol with a surprisingly long range.

Mission 4 Kill Challenge: Kill Matthaus Elrich Using a Rat Bomb

Starting the level in the Resistance Safehouse, you'll find the Rat Bomb needed to complete this challenge upstairs. Make your way over to the area Elrich is patrolling (similar to the last mission, killing him is a main objective) and you'll see him standing near some shelves complaining about rats. Convenient! Once he leaves, you should see a white outline of a rat on the floor, which is precisely where your Rat Bomb needs to be placed. He takes a long time to stop talking and continue his patrol, but once he spots what he thinks is a rat, it's game over for Elrich!





Unlocks: Pist.44. Effective at both close and long ranges, with a high amount of power.

Mission 5 Kill Challenge: Kill Baumann by Burying Him in Concrete

A very simple one here, you can find Baumann in a small shack on the lower left side of the construction site. Wait until he's alone and perform a non-lethal takedown, and pick up his body. Close to the entrance of the building you're in is a pit full of unset concrete; from there it's as straightforward as dumping Baumann into it. Job done!

Unlocks: Type 100. Great rate of fire and control, also comes pre-equipped with a muzzle brake.

Mission 6 Kill Challenge: Kill Jaan Trautmaan with Poison

Head over to the large house where the objective to kill Trautmaan points you towards, where you'll find the poison on a crate next to the stairs on the ground floor. Next, go up these stairs and at the opposite end of the hallway you'll spot a table with a glass on it. No prizes for guessing what Karl pours into it!

Beside the now deadly drink is a bell, which you need to ring (then quickly get out of sight!) to get Trautmaan to come out of his room. A few moments later he'll take a big swig of the poison, finishing him off for good.



Unlocks: Model D. This ordinary pistol has bullets that can pierce through any enemy helmet!

Mission 7 Kill Challenge: Kill Dr. Christian Jungers with a V2

Get yourself over to the weapons lab and you'll come across one area that has giant wind turbines. Above them you'll see the V2 rocket suspended from the ceiling. Jungers will occasionally wander underneath, allowing you to snipe one of the chains and crush him.

For those of you wanting to speed the process up, your target can usually be found in an office in the upstairs portion of this area, where you can simply knock your victim out before — just like in the second kill challenge — leaving him under the V2 rocket and shooting the chain.

Unlocks: RSC 1918. Limited range but a very high rate of fire.

Mission 8 Kill Challenge: Kill Shinji Yoshikawa with a Japanese Weapon

Mission 8 has a few different ways to eliminate Yoshikawa, but I found that the easiest method was to begin the level with the Type 100 submachine gun (unlocked by completing the fifth Kill Challenge) and take him out once you reach his location.

Don't have the Type 100 yet? No problem, as close to the area where Yoshikawa is will be a Type 14 pistol just waiting on a crate for you to pick up!

Unlocks: Type 14 Nambu. Quieter than a regular pistol, with a high rate of fire and reload speed.

There we go, all of Sniper Elite 5's Kill Challenges and how to accomplish them, as well as the respective unlocks. Nothing too difficult here thankfully, and some real fun ways to eliminate a few Nazis! ■







What Celeste Taught Me About Storytelling

By Artura Dawn

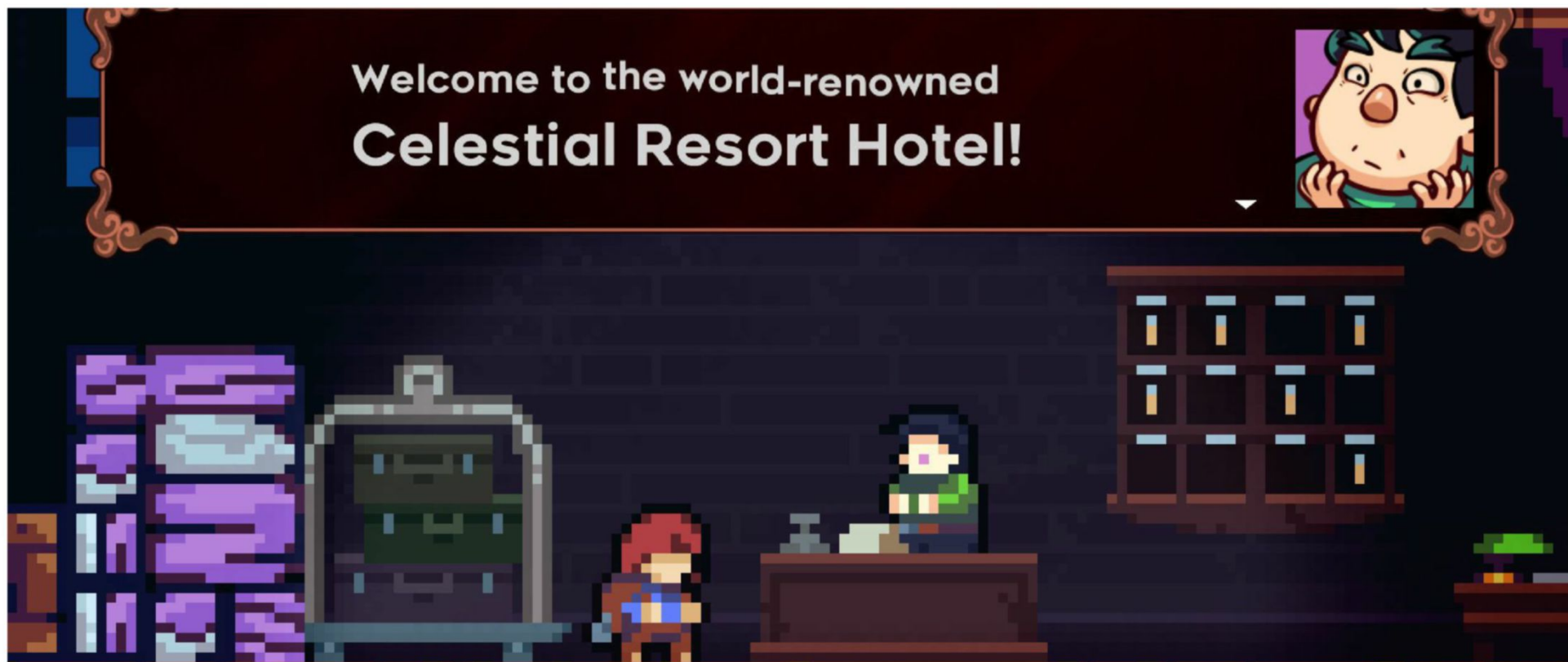
Artura shares her thoughts on Celeste



I love story-heavy games; being faced with moral decisions and ambiguous storylines always makes them feel rich and in-depth. If a game makes me cry at the end of the story, all the better, as I love being forced to choose between two evils and weighing the consequences of siding with either.

Even in games without moral ambiguity, I love heart-wrenching stories. Finishing *God of War* (2018) continues to bring chills to my spine, and it remains my favourite game of all time. And it's not like this hasn't been the case ever since I started gaming; only early on in my years of playing *The Legend of Zelda* and Mario games did I really not

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care for the story, though that's because I didn't know they existed in gaming.

I believe the game that got me addicted to crying was actually Telltale's *The Walking Dead*, which had me sobbing like an infant whose sweets had been stolen. As I finished *The Walking Dead*, I was introduced to a slew of games and swiftly lost interest in the "gameplay first" formula that I'd been following throughout my years. Suddenly, saving the princess didn't matter because it wasn't a difficult enough choice to make, and running around grabbing stars just didn't feel rewarding; I knew I'd win regardless. What became so enticing about these games is that I couldn't know if, in the end, the hero won or not, I couldn't tell you whether the journey would finish on a "happily ever after" note that didn't include a caveat, and that became what I searched for in games.

I guess it's a natural process of growing up, even if that "growing up" is metaphorical on how I discovered games later on in life and, like a kid, I slowly learned how to enjoy more "adult" titles until those I loved before were too simple. So my craze persisted; I continued looking for increasingly darker games, hoping they'd assure me the hero would die in the end and there was nothing I could do about it. The more torn and destroyed I felt at the end, the better. Seemingly, there was no stopping this, as I continued to do so for years to come, even to this day.

I finished *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* recently, and the way the story unfolded made me feel so bad — in a good way! Yet, despite *Sekiro*'s ending being exactly what I want in games, I didn't enjoy the story, at least, not as much as *Celeste*'s.

I replayed *Celeste* after playing a precision platformer with my co-writer *retrogamergirl* and »

found that I'd quite enjoyed the premise of precision platformers. So, as I enjoyed that one, I decided that perhaps it was time to tackle Celeste Mountain once again; and climb I did as I played through the game.

Observing Madeline climb the mountain was the least of the things that interested me about the game; I wanted to suffer and climb the mountain myself, not see the character persevere through her hardships and reach the peak. Originally, I only played Celeste because I wanted to see if I had gotten better from the last time I'd played and if I could die less. As I climbed the mountain, I found myself caring for the story a little more; Theo was an enjoyable character, Madeline seemed to be facing struggles that I appreciated, and the Old Woman (yes, that is apparently her name) was

funny every time I met her. Yet, it didn't captivate me because I knew Madeline would succeed at the summit, and it wasn't only because I'd played the game once already; it's spelt out for you.

Despite knowing of the coming success, climbing the mountain felt... good. As I slowly neared the peak, I found myself rooting for Madeline. It didn't matter if she wouldn't lose; I looked forward to seeing her persevere. And as I reached the final chapter and climbed the last 30 checkpoints, with the game cheering me on along the way, I felt a joy that I hadn't felt in years of gaming: I was going to succeed, for the first time in what felt like forever.

No monster or behemoth awaited me at the end of the climb; no horror stories nor tales that ensured me we'd fail one way or another. As the game so





excitedly cheered me on to continue climbing, I felt excited and invigorated; I couldn't wait to reach the summit. As I slowly approached the peak and watched the remaining number of puzzles count down, I felt borderline melancholic about what I was experiencing, as I knew I'd look back from the future and remember that moment fondly.

To the difference of games I'd been playing the last couple of years, where the closer you are to the ending the more doom-filled the world is, the closer I was to the summit, the better and brighter the world felt. The final boss of Sekiro promised me defeat for countless

hours, but the final climb in Celeste promised me greatness at the peak. Once I'd reached it, and I watched the closing cutscene, I felt serenity, gratification... dare I say, I felt happy. At the end of the story, the tale that awaited me was not heart-wrenching with a big twist, but instead one of fulfilment.

If I took one thing from Celeste, it is that perhaps storytelling doesn't have to be grim. Perhaps it's okay to have a calm tale every once in a while. Because once I reached the summit, I wasn't sobbing, mourning my hero or deuteragonist; rather, I was glad for her. Celeste taught me that simple storytelling isn't boring, it's peaceful. ■



Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice Diaries - Part 4

By Erin McAllister

Erin continued a journey



Welcome back to my Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice Diaries, a collection of connected articles where I recount my experiences of running headlong into a brick wall over and over again until enough of the bricks fall out that I can sneak through. Previously, I had finally managed to defeat the Shinobi Hunter, complete my first Prayer Bead Necklace, and make some headway at the Hirata Estate...

But before I could explore any further, I had to rest at the nearby Sculptor's Idol, as my health bar was criminally low. Once I returned to full fighting strength, there was only one way forward left to me at the Estate: a bamboo-covered path leading uphill. However, there was also one path behind me that I hadn't yet explored. In the previous miniboss arena, there was a large bridge leading up to the fight. During some of my failed attempts, I had jumped down there to rest on the various branches until the Hunter and the soldiers forgot

about me and how I had just stabbed half of them to death. The water underneath had looked dark in the night, the river flowing down from somewhere higher up. I didn't want to abandon the fight before, but now that the Shinobi Hunter was never going to return, I thought to myself, "Why not have a look?"

Rushing backwards and passing by the newly respawned soldiers in a reckless attempt to avoid battle, I made it to the bridge and down into the river with only a handful of scrapes and gashes. I looked back downwards, seeing that the water ended with a short fall blocked from me by the bridge. Upwards it was. I swam forwards, cautiously looking this way and that to ensure that no soldiers or monsters would get the drop on me. Part of that included obsessively mashing the right analog stick to lock-on to any enemies that I may have missed. Strangely, even though I never saw

anything in there, the game kindly informed me that there absolutely was.

The camera shifted to a high angle looking down at the water, showing the unmoving, bright, white dot of an enemy that I had successfully locked-on to. Only... there was nobody there. I shifted the right stick to see if this potential foe was alone and found out that there were allegedly two enemies around, right next to each other. I assumed that meant these two were likely Treasure Carps, wonderfully large fish that, when felled, dropped their scales, which I could use as a sort of currency to gain many useful items from another character. With that in mind, please do not think me a fool when I slashed at the water for several solid minutes in an attempt to hit something that was nowhere within the range of my sword. To be frank, I might still be doing that today were it not for the enemies' eventual response. I suppose that a shinobi splashing his sword around in the middle of a river for five minutes would be hard to miss for even the most oblivious undersea creature.

All of a sudden, this frustratingly motionless dot began to move, as though it were approaching me. That gave me pause: Treasure Carps were designed to flee at the first sign of trouble, but these mystery beings were approaching me? Instead of running away, they were coming right for me. That could only mean one thing: they were about to wipe the floor (or should I say, the river) with me. In a panic, I made a run for it. These were not carp! However, I couldn't exactly get back up to where I'd been before; the soldiers were likely not going to be as easy to run past this time and I wasn't quite in my most tactical or stealthy mood at the time. So I swam like a mad ninja up the river, taking the first chance I could to grapple up to one branch and then another. My memory and Sekiro's movement alike were a blur and I had soon found my way up to a cliff.

I allowed myself to relax and catch my breath before taking a look around. This was the same sort of bamboo forest that was by the newly revealed Sculptor's Idol, so that place couldn't have been too far. Perhaps this was a secret area or at least



somewhere further along that path? I would have to double back in order to pick up everything if it were the latter, but I couldn't not explore the new-ish locale! I was a bit disoriented, but still I was able to slowly walk around, cautious of another sudden appearance of an enemy. It didn't take me too long to notice the new foes, thankfully. There were a series of these armoured warriors walking around on a larger area beneath me and another soldier in the same armour near a fire just across the path I was on. I snuck forward, finding that, no matter where I turned, there were even more soldiers. None of them seemed to notice me, so I was safe for now. However, I was now surrounded by enemies that I had simply never seen before in a location that I hadn't figured out the geography for yet. Where exactly would I retreat if these soldiers proved too powerful? Jump all of the way down to the river? No, thank you. I would simply have to mark this area off for now, at least until I could see it from another angle or face one of these warriors in a safer environment. I snagged a nearby Mibu Possession Balloon before making my retreat. I didn't exactly feel safe going back the way I had

come, but I possessed an incredibly useful tool: the Homeward Idol, which I used to transport myself back to the Bamboo Thicket Sculptor's Idol.

Figuring the river behind me was a wash for now, I pressed on ahead, snagging one Spirit Emblem on the path. Up ahead, there was another soldier with a torch, another of my most hated nemeses. Thinking quickly, I grappled up to a nearby ledge to the left. However, as I prepared to strike, I noticed that I was once again right next to a large river, this one being on the other side of the path. I supposed that, as much as I had hated the last experience, trying a different body of water likely couldn't hurt.

Dropping down into the river with a small splash, I looked around once more for anyone I could lock-on to, finding yet another mysterious underwater adversary somewhere beneath me. Unwilling to spend another moment in the same space as this unknown being, I moved away from the cliff's edge and underneath a large bridge. As I swam underneath the supports, it felt as though I was passing through some sort of imposing gateway,





like a scared traveller being driven off of the road and into a manor owned by a ferocious monster. These hopefully unfounded fears were soon completely wiped away when my furtive, darting eyes caught sight of a Treasure Carp. A real one this time, with a flash of orange scales peeking out from the water as the fish swam around.

I was on the Carp in an instant, chasing my prey up the river and waiting for the perfect time to strike. Soon, my brief fishing trip proved fruitful and I had a very pretty Treasure Carp Scale to show for it. Up here, the river didn't extend any further — or at least, it didn't lead anywhere I could follow. Thankfully, there was a low branch connected to a raised ledge at the bottom of the nearby cliffside. Once out of the water, I had to cut my way forward through some bamboo trees, finally living the life of a movie explorer cutting through trees and vines to show my inability to exist alongside plantlife, and the fact that I have a cool sword. On this short path, I managed to pick up three more Spirit Emblems and a single dose of Contact Medicine. The Contact Medicine, which instils a weak poison on the user,

didn't seem terribly helpful at the time. The item's description carefully notes one possible application however: because being afflicted by one type of poison makes the player immune to all other poisons, accepting a poison that doesn't damage them all that much can make areas and enemies that rely on poisoning their adversaries far easier to deal with. The description also mentions a "specific technique" that it can be used for, but I supposed that was just something I would have to figure out myself.

After cutting past one final row of bamboo trees, I found myself in front of two short, symmetrical walls, arranged such that I could wall jump between them up to the top of the cliff. My first attempt in leaping to and fro up the cliffside ended less than successfully. I had reached the top, but hadn't quite realised it and kept jumping. Eventually, there was no second wall to bounce off of and I instead fell all of the way back down, taking a small amount of falling damage. I had not even realised Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice had falling damage!

However, the second time was the charm and I was soon atop the cliff, looking deeper into the thicket above. There was a short path around the corner, leading to this small building that almost seemed to be a temple of sorts. And atop that possible temple was another shinobi, framed against the sky. Was this someone I could talk to? A new NPC? I hadn't seen one in ages! I moved forward, one step at a time, until I would be in range for the lock-on to work. Sadly, it did. And shortly after that worked, the ninja was on the move, dropping down to my level in mere seconds, drawing his blade and advancing. A shame, to be sure, but at least I was facing a new enemy type alone in a straight fight. I couldn't see his name, so this was just a normal foe. I thought to myself that it might be hard and I might die once or twice, but that I would be able to learn how to deal with him before long.

That was before I made four attempts and died twice every time.

This enemy, whom I learned was known as an Interior Ministry Ninja, was incredibly fast and precise. With a series of kicks and bladework, he was unrelenting. I normally tend to prefer dodging my opponents and baiting attacks, but that was not working here. If I managed to move around an attack and get in close, I would find myself trading blow after blow. Every one of my hits on the Ninja were returned to me threefold. If I moved out of the way of his strikes, I had to continue backing up until I was full-on running away and around the building, and ultimately got hit once I lost sight of him. It took some getting used to, but deflecting the Ninja's attacks worked a lot better in the moment. I was able to fend off most of his attacks this way, but in the process, I racked up loads of Posture damage. If I allowed my Posture to be depleted, I would be easy pickings. Thankfully, the Ninja occasionally did a special kick that allowed me to use my Mikiri Counter to leave him wide open for a moment. However, he was back on his feet and delivering blow after blow against me before I had a chance to restore my Posture.



Eventually, I grew unwilling to risk Dragonrot, a strange disease that can infect people in the game's world if Sekiro dies too often, and tried to find some sort of strategy online. One crazy idea that sounded interesting mentioned jumping back down to the water after engaging the Ninja in combat. Allegedly, he would stay on the ground rather than leap back up to his perch on top of the building. This way, I would be able to sneak up behind him and execute him with style and grace. With only one health bar, that would bring an end to the fight. Finally, a benefit to my greatest foe not actually being a miniboss.

Once more, I climbed. However, instead of engaging my fellow ninja in close-quarters combat, I threw a shuriken from my Shinobi Prosthetic as soon as I was in range, then high-tailed it out of there and jumped into the water. Once more, I took a small amount of falling damage, but that was a small price to pay for revenge. Again, I jumped back and forth up the cliff. I crouched as I rounded the corner, not wanting the sound of my

running to alert the Ninja. I was happy to see that the internet advice was correct and that he was indeed standing around in the grass. I was less happy to see that he was facing the route leading up to him, meaning that sneaking around him was virtually impossible. I took a deep breath. This was probably just him retreating up the path after I took so long to return to the clifftop; if I took less time after shooting the ninja, I would probably be able to catch him. Once more, I threw a shuriken, but in my retreat, I instead jumped down the two symmetrical walls. It was much closer and would allow me to get back up in record time! It was a genius idea.

However, that also allowed the Ninja to follow me down, which I noticed when a blur passed along my screen as I made my ascent for the third time in the fight. With a strangled yelp, I fell back into the river, hoping he wouldn't follow me. With a practised effort, I grappled up to the nearby low branch once more. Moving around a lot tended to work wonders for evading my enemies' sights. »



There wasn't much room here, but if I could lose the Ninja in any way, this was it. However, the Ninja seemed to be following my moves and jumped into the river right as I reached the branch.

Time seemed to slow down around me as fear dawned on me once more. Up at the clifftop, there was at least some space to move around and reposition myself, but this low cliffside had essentially zero room to manoeuvre. With the Ninja's unrelenting attacks, I would be entirely screwed, even if he too had little room to jump around. I was absolutely scrambling for any kind of plan that could salvage this mess, when... a message popped up on the screen. I've found a Scrap Iron? Where did that come from?

I cleared the message and money flew into me from the river. My most fearsome foe had drowned.

I felt guilty, coming out on top in this impossible duel, not through great effort or a well-planned

trick, but by sheer happenstance. At the same time, I could not contain my relief and joy at the lucky outcome. All the same, I climbed back up a fourth time. With no one to stop me, I finally approached the front of the building, claiming the Mist Raven Feathers. Taking them back to the Sculptor in the Dilapidated Temple, I received a new Prosthetic Tool, the Mist Raven. This new ability allowed me to essentially teleport around enemies whenever I took damage. I'm not always great at using counter-like abilities, especially ones that actually require the user to take damage, but I was happy to accept the new tool as a reward. Particularly once I realised that poison damage also counted as damage for the Mist Raven. Perhaps this was what the Contact Medicine's description had been referring to. If I could constantly take a small amount of damage, wouldn't I be able to use the Mist Raven to teleport whenever I wished to? Either way, I was ecstatic to finally be done with the Interior Ministry Ninja.

For now, at least.. ■

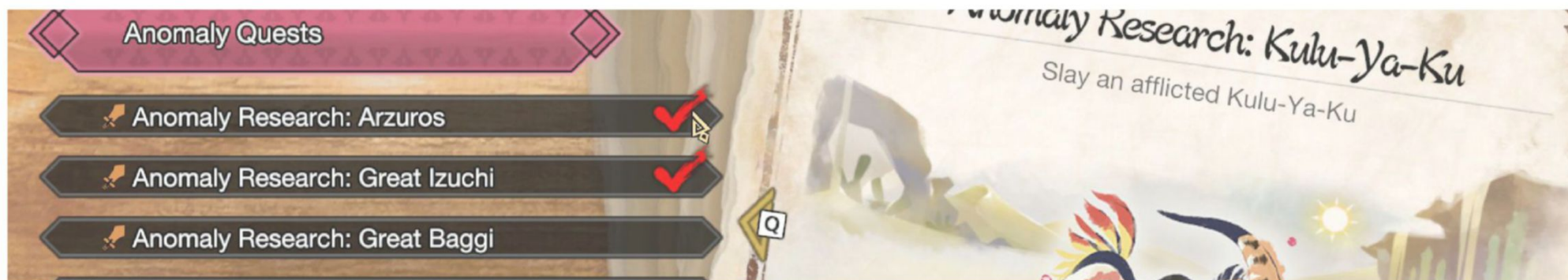


Mist Raven's Feathers



A bundle of Mist Raven feathers.
Can be fitted to the Shinobi Prosthetic
to create a Prosthetic Tool.
In Usui Forest far to the north of Ashina,
live many mysterious birds of prey.
The Mist Raven is the only one to have
eluded capture by all who have tried.
Should you somehow manage it, you'll
find it gone, only feathers in your grasp.

OK



Monster Hunter Rise: Sunbreak — What are Anomaly Quests?

By Dylan Pamintuan

Confused by Anomaly Quests? Look no further!



Warning: This article is meant for hunters who have already slain the final boss of Monster Hunter Rise: Sunbreak (MR6: Proof of Courage). If you're reading this and have no idea what a Quiro is or haven't seen the triple Dragonator, please turn back now.

Or don't. I'm a writer, not your parent/legal guardian.

So, you've beaten the demon from hell Gaismagorm and have seen the credits. Congratulations, you've completed Sunbreak's main





story! However, a hunter's work is never done. Remember the Quiro? Those life-absorbing parasites from Malzeno? Yeah, they need a new host.

And they're checking almost every monster in the game to see if they're suitable.

A new type of quest will be unlocked once you reach MR10: Anomaly Quests. The target of these quests have been afflicted with the Quiro, making them much more aggressive and stronger, in addition to being capable of inflicting Bloodblight; this lowers the effectiveness of healing items but allows you to regain health by attacking the monster. They're also rendered unable to be captured, so you will have to slay them like an Elder Dragon. However, in exchange, afflicted monsters

will drop special materials for new decorations and upgrades to weapons. You'll unlock more Anomaly Quests as you reach higher MR levels, after you beat the Urgent Quest.

If you remember the Frenzy system from 4 Ultimate, it's kinda like that except with Bloodblight.

However, there are some differences. During your fight, you may spot these glowing red spots on the monster's body. These are Anomaly Cores. They appear when the monster is angered, and if you deal enough damage they'll burst and deal additional damage to the monsters. Plus if you destroy enough of them, you'll pacify the monster for a brief amount of time, allowing you to freely attack with little chance of retaliation. If you don't ➤➤ destroy those cores fast enough though, the

monster will use Anomaly Burst: a heavily damaging attack that will leave you stunned...which usually ends in a cart back to camp. The game does teach you all this, and all the tutorials are in the Hunter's Info menu.

Anomaly monsters are true tests of skill and knowledge of your targets, so I really hope you've got your practice in all throughout Master Rank.

I do recommend playing multiplayer for these hunts. Gunners are especially valuable here as they can hit those Anomaly Cores very easily while staying out of range of the Anomaly Burst should they fail. Speaking of Anomaly Burst, get complete Stun Resistance. On the occasions that you fail to destroy the cores and can't get out of the way, at least you aren't guaranteed to faint and can wirefall out of danger.

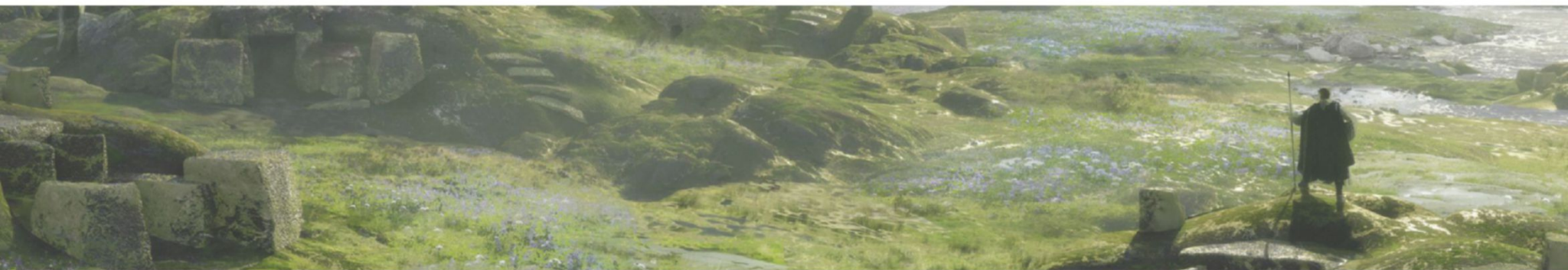
However, there is an important question we need to ask: Is it worth it? Well... the short answer is yes. The new decorations crafted from afflicted materials are good, and those upgraded weapons will definitely help in future Anomaly Quests as well as the Urgent Quests to uncap your MR level. Be advised however, the only new drops are afflicted materials and there are no increased chances of getting rarer materials.

Anomaly Quests are sure to fill in the time between the free title updates that will add new monsters like Lucent Nargacuga and Seething Bazelgeuse later this year. Be safe out there, hunters, and good luck. You're gonna need it.

Monster Hunter Rise: Sunbreak is out now on Nintendo Switch and Steam. ■



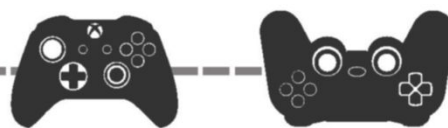




Why MMORPGs Will Forever Be My Favourite Game Genre

By Carson Clark

Carson just loves MMORPG



Fantasy, a word defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as, “A creation of the imaginative faculty whether expressed or merely conceived,” is a genre that piques the interest of countless individuals across the globe from all walks of life. Is it because these people enjoy an escape from their personal reality, a break from the usual routine? Or is it because they simply

like getting immersed in a world with characters and environments previously unbeknownst to them? Or maybe even that they’re genuinely entertained and amused by the brainchild of other gifted individuals? All of the above, of course, are correct and plausible answers. Fantasy can be conveyed through all types of medium, whether it be books, shows, movies, music, or games. Of all





potential media, my personal argument for the best way to convey a fantastical world or universe is undeniably through Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs).

What makes a work of fantasy great? Again, there's a plethora of solid answers. However, I believe the majority of people would agree that world and character building, or developing the setting and establishing character profiles and personalities, are key to a thriving story. Popular books like Harry Potter and Lord of the Rings, movies such as Inception and Interstellar, and games such as Detroit: Become Human and the Fallout series all lend themselves to the two aforementioned keys. They have extremely unique and refined worlds and characters, while taking the time to portray exactly how the creator envisioned those things to be.

Now imagine a new world, with the established setting and characters of a great fantasy piece. Imagine it's a game, so it's up to you to interact with and learn more about them. Now imagine there's a completely new facet — an entire community of unknown characters, all with unique backgrounds and personalities. This community is constantly evolving, as the people within it grow and change, come and go, and live their lives. This group of people aren't entities bound to the digital world they were born in, but other players just like yourself. Not only are you adventuring through a fantasy land enjoying what content has been prepared for you, you're alongside other people on the same ride at the same time. You could embark on this journey with friends already known to you or make new ones along the way. Depending on the game, you could be sharing the same digital soil with thousands of other players at the same »

time, which offers an experience any other genre simply cannot.

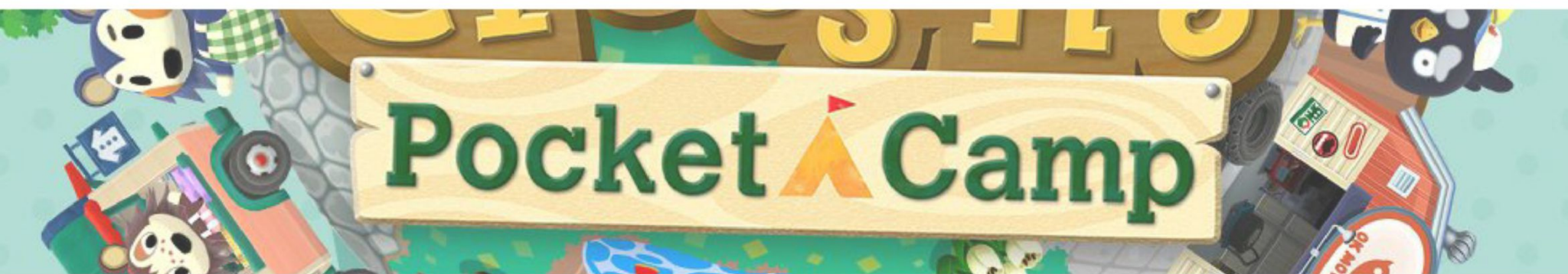
Regardless of how you choose to interact with others and to what degree, they will undeniably have an impact on your experience in that game, just like people change your day-to-day lives in the real world. You can choose exactly who you want to be and what role you want to play in this environment, whether that's someone who plays the player-driven economy and amasses quite the personal wealth, a crafter/merchant who makes/sells equipment and consumables for other players, or an adventurer who finds their calling

fighting monsters or even other players out in the world.

I'm absolutely in love with the flexibility and dynamism an MMORPG has to offer, and continue to be fascinated by the ways the genre has adapted and evolved over the decade I've enjoyed it. I believe that there is no better way to get immersed in a fantasy realm than by delving into an MMORPG, becoming one of the thousands of the community within it and simply enjoying your time there however you see fit. If you consider yourself a gamer and haven't found yourself in one of these games before, I strongly suggest you do; I believe you won't regret your decision! ■







Can You Enjoy Animal Crossing: Pocket Camp Without Spending?

By Artura Dawn

Artura ponders microtransactions



Throughout my years of gaming, I've grown bitter and cynical, in particular with mobile games. You see, I've tried many a game that has microtransactions that ultimately ruin the experience, be it for pay-to-win mechanics or heavily monetised things that start making it feel hard to be able to enjoy them. It's for this reason that I've begun to pay very close attention to microtransactions in games and how greedy they may or may not be.

In my journeys, I've stumbled upon Animal Crossing: Pocket Camp, a charming little game made by Nintendo. The mobile entry of the Animal Crossing franchise has you running a small camp where you can host up to eight whimsical villagers ranging from barnyard animals to cephalopods; it's basically Animal Crossing with a hint of mobile.

The main goal in the game is to befriend all of the campers whilst also decorating the several areas that are offered to you: the campsite, the cabin, and your very own van. As such, you could guess that some of the furniture would be gated behind paywalls due to its mobile roots, and you wouldn't be wrong.

The premium currency in Pocket Camp is called "Leaf Tickets" with several ways to acquire them. Of course, the first and most obvious one is purchasing them with real currency, with prices ranging from \$0.99 to \$39.99, several deals that happen in events (such as the latest Black Friday sale), and subscription services that provide some benefits along with a few Leaf Tickets monthly.

The second way of acquiring them is mostly through playing. Surprisingly, Nintendo can be very



generous with these, especially to brand new players. There are several different ways to be able to acquire these, which include things like playing and levelling up, logging in daily, and participating in the monthly events. Although these don't net you a ton of Leaf Tickets, smart spenders will find these to be enough for some of the things they might want.

The main problem with the Leaf Ticket currency is how costly some things can be, along with how they continue becoming more expensive as time goes on.

Some items are only available via Leaf Tickets; these are the most premium, such as "special"

campers that you can place around your camp, like K.K. Slider, Brewster, and the notorious Tom Nook.

Aside from the special campers, players can acquire one fortune cookie that will contain one of 10 items with varying rarities, each one costing 50 Leaf Tickets. These fortune cookies work like loot boxes, and getting too many of these will often net several of the most common items whilst few or none of the rarest; in terms of cost efficiency, the fortune cookies feel like some of the least profitable options.

These aren't the only premium items either. Not only are premium currency items common — with the gyroidite hunt event often releasing two or more premium items — but Nintendo also



releases monthly clothes that you can only acquire through Leaf Tickets. The unfortunate part is that if you want to dress up all of your campers, you could be spending north of 1,000 Leaf Tickets to adorn them all and yourself. That's \$39.99!

All hope isn't lost, however. Pocket Camp offers enough Leaf Tickets at times to feel satisfied and be able to acquire a lot of the items one wants. Although there are certainly some items that feel significantly less cost-efficient, like the aforementioned fortune cookies and clothes, you can acquire some of the items with enough farming due to how often you can get Leaf Tickets through the events. However, this does mean that acquiring cookie items becomes borderline impossible; the keyword being "borderline".

If you have a friend, you can get them addicted to Pocket Camp and exchange gifts with them. These gifts you can acquire through different means, such as participating in the latest event which rewards players with some unique gifts that have one of the latest cookies released; although this is only a chance at getting cookies, there is the + version of each gift that assures one of the cookies in the list. These gifts are given commonly enough that my wife and I have been able to get tons of random cookie items because we play regularly and trade.

Aside from the trading, Nintendo always gifts one of each of the new cookies every month in the "collecting" events that take part in-between the main events. These reward one of the latest cookies released, from which I've heard of some people getting ridiculous luck and getting the rarest





item. You can also get a cookie through Timmy's and Tommy's stall, which resets daily and sometimes has one or two cookies for sale at the cost of bells, the free currency in-game.

And of course, the last and most efficient way to get cookie items is by purchasing the \$7.99 Cookie & Depot Plan. This monthly plan offers the capability to choose five cookies from a large assortment of newly-released and ones dating years back to their original release. Not only does this plan help with gathering stamps that you can use to exchange for a specific cookie item, but it also has offered my wife the capability to acquire many cookie items that she wanted. The Cookie & Depot Plan is more cost-efficient because it offers five cookies less expensive than buying the Leaf Tickets to buy them,

but it also lets you choose from cookies that are no longer available.

Animal Crossing: Pocket Camp is a great game to spend your time on, and although the monetisation can be frustrating at times, I think the best way to experience the game is being a low-spender; most players won't need to spend thousands of dollars to get what they want. Going free-to-play is definitely an option, but then it is imperative to keep in mind to wisely spend, and forget about being able to have everything you want due to how many premium items are released monthly. Nintendo can be generous with Leaf Tickets, but not that much. ■

Metal: Hellsinger

By Alana Dunitz



Publisher: Funcom
Developer: The Outsiders
Genre: Action, Adventure
Release Date: 2022
Platform: PC, Xbox X|S, PS5



Metal: Hellsinger is a heavy metal first-person shooter, narrated by none other than Troy Baker who you may know as Joel in *The Last Of Us*, Batman in the Telltale Batman series, or Joker from *Batman: Arkham Origins*. That is just a bit of the voice work he has done, and you know that this narration is going to be great. I originally thought it was a title like *Doom* or *Wolfenstein* until I realised that to be successful, you had to keep time with the music to inflict massive damage, if your timing is off, you can still damage the enemy, but chances are they will kill you before you can destroy them with your weak attacks. If your hits are not on beat, your attack will do 50 damage to your opponent, if you manage to have good or perfect timing the damage jumps up to 330! That is a huge difference!

You play as an Unknown soldier, who has been sent to the depths of hell to slay the demons and other creatures that take up residence there. The more you slaughter the more points you get. The premise sounds simple enough, but being overrun by these hellish creatures makes this a challenging feat! The game starts you off with a tutorial area, luckily your

character is prepared for battle and is equipped with a sword and Paz's skull; the skull will stun the enemy to make them susceptible to a larger attack with your sword so in the tutorial you can experimenting using them in tandem to do the most damage possible. When you destroy the demons, there will be items to collect that will fill your fury meter; and once your fury meter is full, you will be able to unleash a large attack on your foes. But that's not the only good thing that happens when you get fury points; the more you earn the better the music becomes. At first, the heavy metal music is only instrumental; if you get enough fury points, the vocal track for the song will start playing; this was a really unique aspect of the game! It was nice knowing that once I heard the vocals, I must be doing pretty good. During the tutorial, you can die and be resurrected an unlimited amount of times for free, but once you start playing in the hells, you only get to be resurrected three times and every time you do, it will cost you the points you have earned. Once you die three times, your run is done, and you will get to see if your score was good enough to get you onto the online leaderboard.



Besides the great narration, you will notice that this game looks gorgeous, so much so that I had to go into the settings and turn down the quality to medium so my system wouldn't have issues playing the game. Even on medium and the FPS turned down, the demo still looks and plays great! The game's soundtrack is totally different from any other rhythm game I have played before, cheery pop music is not to be found here; instead, it's replaced with aggressive heavy metal music, which is the perfect fit as you are trapped in hell battling demons and monsters.

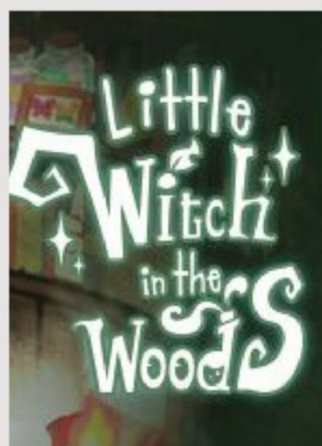
During your time in the hells, you will be challenged with torments. If you successfully beat a torment, you will unlock new powers and spoils for our Unknown warrior and increase their might in various ways. You can also get new weapons like a shotgun that will have to be reloaded after firing off a few shots, and dual-wielding revolvers. Even with the new weapons, my favourite were the swords

since I don't have to worry about reloading, though you will have to be closer to the enemy, so you will have to decide which fits your playstyle more. I'm sure as I attempt more runs, my weapon of choice may change as I get further and try out new techniques to improve on my score but that's the fun part. Most of my runs did not last an incredibly long amount of time, so once I had to be resurrected it was a chance to change things up. My best run had me ranked at spot 60 on the leaderboards, I have to keep trying to improve and get closer to the top!

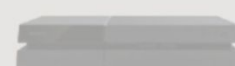
Metal: Hellsinger is a must-play title for anyone who loves metal music and rhythm games, you will be treated to a beautiful looking game full of challenge and great narration. I can't wait to spend more time attempting to best my high score, all while listening to a kick-ass metal soundtrack! I'm looking forward to seeing what horrors await us in the full game once it releases. ■

Little Witch in the Woods

By Alana Dunitz



Publisher: SUNNY SIDE UP
Developer: SUNNY SIDE UP
Genre: Adventure
Release Date: Out Now (Early Access)
Platform: PC, Xbox One, Xbox X|S



Do you love games with a retro look that are wholesome and full of magic? Little Witch in the Woods ticks all those boxes and more. In this preview that came onto Xbox Game Pass on the 17th of May, you play as a young apprentice witch named Ellie. You have finished your time at witch school and now you have to complete your three-year apprenticeship to become a fully-fledged witch. On your way to the Witch's House called Highlion, the train has to stop because mysterious thick vines have appeared over the tracks; Ellie being incredibly bored from the train ride, decides to go and explore the forest before the train continues its journey. Ellie is not alone, accompanying her is Virgil the talking witch's hat. She spots a glowing cat that she decides to follow through the forest, this kitty leads them to an abandoned house. It is late at night and Ellie is tired so she decides to take a quick nap before she heads back to the train. We learn from Virgil that Ellie is quite smart, but also a huge troublemaker, so he is not surprised when they hear the whistle of the train leaving without them.





As an apprentice witch, you will make a lot of mistakes, but that is okay, that is how you learn and Virgil will help you out and give you advice on how to handle any obstacles that are in your way. The conversations the two have are always entertaining, I love the humour between them! When you first explore the forest, Ellie comes across an abandoned house that another witch previously lived in. Once you follow Virgil's advice and pull out all the weeds that have taken over the yard and clean out all the dust and cobwebs inside, you find an elevator. This elevator takes you down to the Dispensary, this is where you will find everything that you need to create potions like a cauldron, tons of books with recipes, and ingredients to use in your creations. Virgil reminds you of all the different steps required to successfully make useful potions: first, you need to find all the ingredients you need that are listed in the recipe, next you need to set the required fire setting for the right temperature — if it's too hot or

too cold you will ruin that batch, and you have to follow the ladle directions — some potions do not require stirring and others will be a certain amount of times. Some potions can be used for weed removal, others will replenish health, and some candies that you make can remove curses.

While you venture through the forest you will come across a huge variety of creatures that you can identify by using your quill pen and drawing them into your encyclopaedia. These entries will tell you useful information about each specimen like the time of day they come out, what you need to catch them, or other information like if you pick up an adorable Squishychub it will drop fur that you can use to craft potions. If Ellie gets tired she can have a nap on a bench during the day, or if it is dark and later at night she will sleep in the bed in the house, if it's too early or she isn't tired she will refuse to sleep. But if you are in the house anyways, be sure to save your game before heading out. ➤

You will meet tons of really cute characters in the forest, some human and some animal-like in appearance. Ellie will go out of her way to help anyone she meets, like a poor fox that is stuck in a huge spider web, the poor little guy is feeling weak so she carries him back to the house to help him heal up so she can take him home. This game is so sweet and charming, all you want to do is be helpful! It's nice playing a title that has you being so helpful and friendly.

The music fits the game very well and is cute and charming without being irritating. When you are on the train at the beginning the sounds of the whistle and the wheels on the metal track are great. Little Witch in the Woods takes inspiration from titles you would see on the Super Nintendo and has great-looking pixel graphics and environments to explore. I love the little touches like the expression on Virgil the hat's face giving him his own personality and bringing him to life.

I can not wait to guide Ellie on the rest of her journey through her apprenticeship and learn all the things a witch should know and meet all the characters she gets to help along the way. This RPG, full of exploration, and simulation is unlike anything I have played before. Who knew following potion recipes could be so challenging and rewarding! Little Witch in the Woods is one of those titles that makes you feel good and I would recommend it to anyone, especially if you need to experience a little magic in your life! ■





The Tale of Bistun

By Artura Dawn



Publisher: IMGN.PRO
Developer: Black Cube Games
Genre: Action, Adventure
Release Date: Out Now
Platform: PC, Xbox One, Xbox X|S



I can hardly imagine something worse than not being able to remember one's own name, and that is precisely how our protagonist in The Tale of Bistun is introduced to the world.

Recently, I picked up the demo for The Tale of Bistun, a narrative adventure in which players take control of Farhad, a man that has lost all recollection of his memories — this includes his very name. Stranded in an unknown land by a pomegranate tree (you didn't read that wrong) named All-Seeds (yes, like the All-Father from Norse mythology, but for trees), Farhad undertakes the task of figuring out his past.

This tale might sound familiar to those that have read the ancient romantic Persian poem Khosrow and Shirin. For those that haven't even heard of it (like me), the narrative so far — in the very short experience I had with the game — is clear and concise, even for someone that doesn't know anything about the ancient poem. In fact, not understanding anything causes an interconnection between the player and Farhad, as both members are equally confused about the nature of this

world. Perhaps us more than Farhad, considering he seems nonchalant about the talking tree (that speaks anything outside of Groot) or the fact that he's breaking apart the side of a mountain, but I digress.

Since The Tale of Bistun is inspired by the poem Khosrow and Shirin, it has beautiful narration as you traverse the world. The omniscient narrator tells the player of the way Farhad is feeling and about numerous aspects of the world, and works as a great way to inform us of things that we wouldn't otherwise be privy to. I thoroughly enjoyed the sound design in the game, but more so the narration, including the silly yet funny voice-overs that the narrator does for some of the characters. Although I really enjoyed my brief time with The Tale of Bistun, the narration was certainly a highlight.

Throughout my short time with the game's demo, I only got to experience a handful of combat scenarios and even fewer levels to explore through. The Tale of Bistun is filled with dialogue and lovely cinematics that depict Farhad slowly remembering



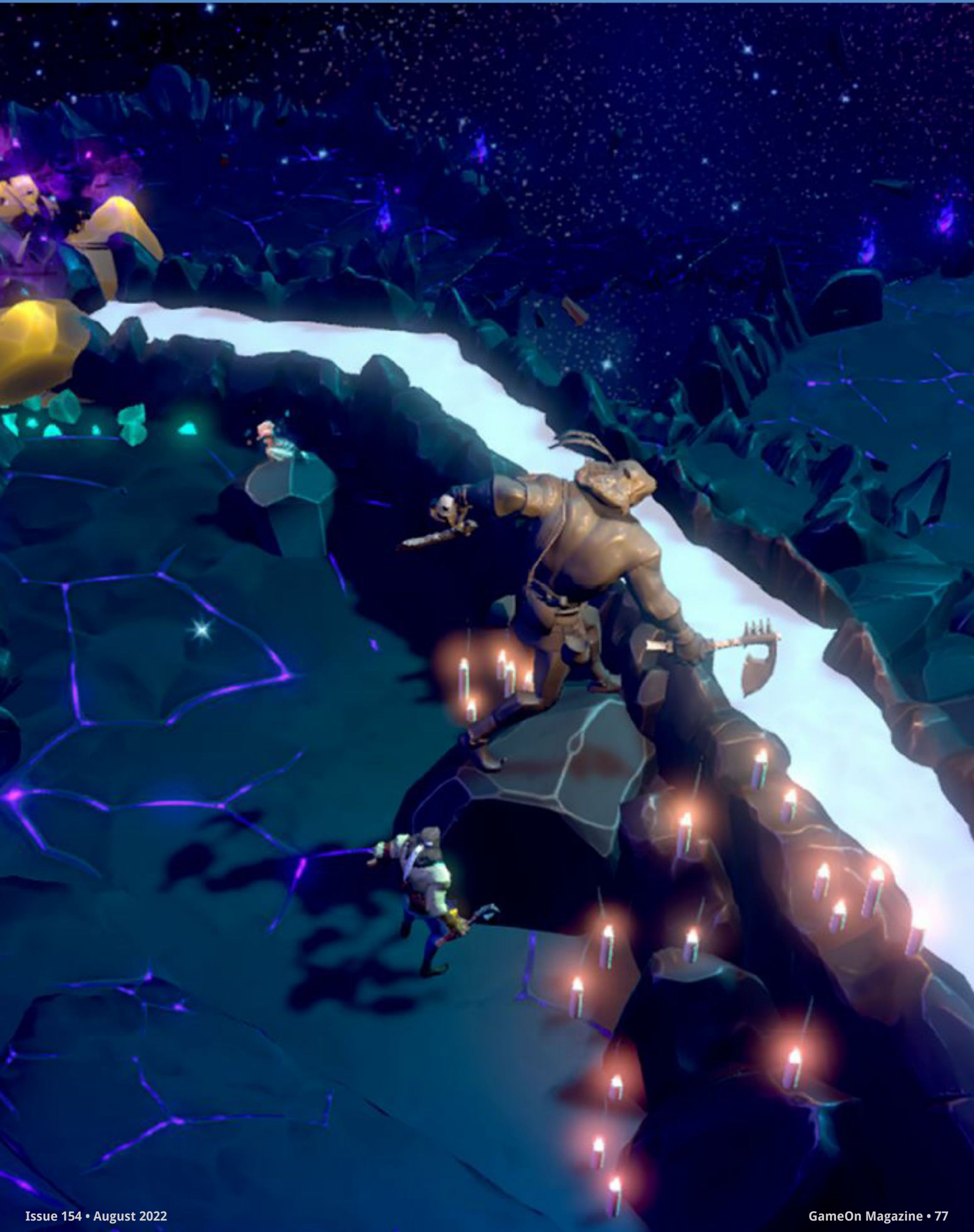
his past and growing motivated by it, and this takes part throughout most of the gameplay. Aside from that, you venture out onto worlds through a qanat gate that leads you into a linear overworld area where you will have to fight a blight that is affecting All-Seeds' kin; in return, he vows to help. As such, you will embark out into the world, find crystals that contain enemies named ghoulches (they're goblins and I will not be convinced otherwise!), and make quick work of them to free the trees. Scattered throughout the level are numerous collectibles, such as carvings that Farhad wished to do from his memories and stone tablets that help you better understand the lore. These aren't hidden in nooks and crannies but are often displayed readily in the world, as they are concealed within breakable vases. These stone tablets include a brief description of the world (often furthering our understanding of the lore as well) from the point of view of a previous inhabitant of Mount Bistun. This helps create a bit of a side story to follow and invest yourself outside of the main one.

Combat is very simple, and I often opted to wake up all of the enemies at once so that I could fight

swarms of them instead of battling individually; enemies are staggered easily, attack slowly, and don't seem to have much more of a brain outside of "attack this". Although the... (ugh) ghoulches didn't have a lot of mind to them, the paries (long-range harpy-like creatures) did try to flee whenever I got into melee range with them, but aside from that, they also didn't seem to have much more depth to their AI. This isn't a big quarrel of mine, as I enjoy the narrative focus of The Tale of Bistun, but I do wish that the enemies were a bit more complex; here's hoping that the whole game has a wider variety of enemies with increasing levels of difficulty.

Overall, my time with The Tale of Bistun was fun; I thoroughly enjoyed the narration and visuals, and although the combat left me a bit wanting, I chalked that up to having only witnessed the first two levels, and I am expecting foes to only grow stronger as I delve deeper into the story. I can't wait for the game to release on the 13th of July to see where the story of Farhad and All-Seeds takes us! ■





Lone Fungus

By Artura Dawn



Publisher: Basti Games

Developer: Basti Games

Genre: Platform

Release Date: Out Now (Steam Early Access)

Platform: PC

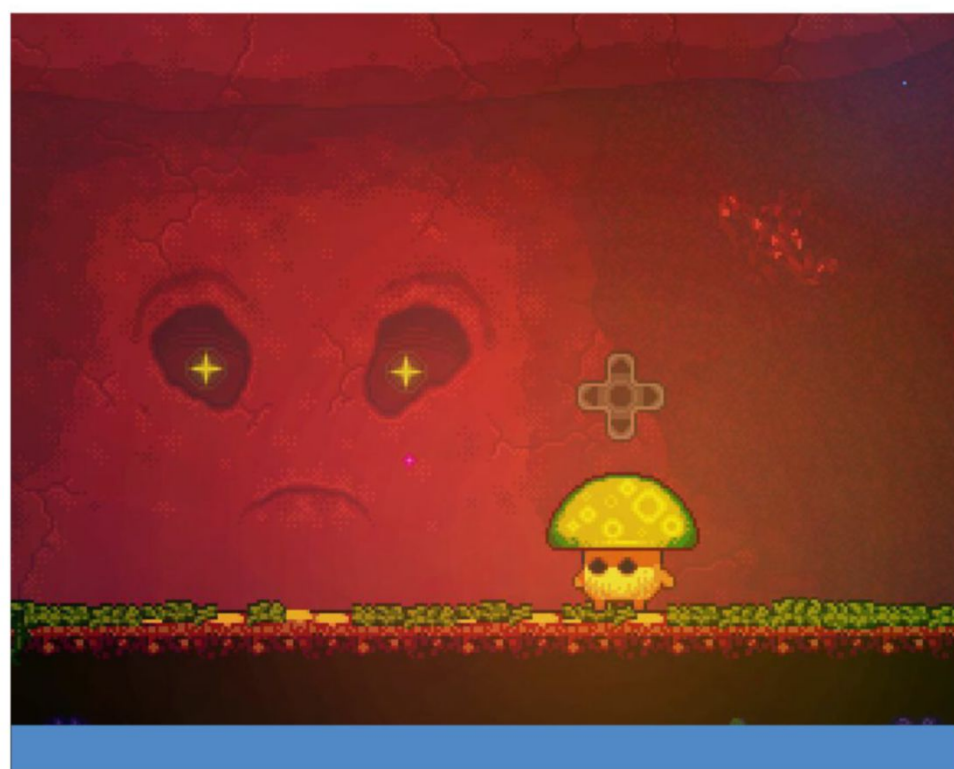


Before I start the preview, I'd like to mention something: Lone Fungus is very similar to Hollow Knight and draws plenty of inspiration from the title. That said, I will do my best to avoid any comparisons, as Lone Fungus is its own game, and deserves to be treated as such.

In Lone Fungus, you take control of the last fungi of its kind as you set forth on a quest throughout an ancient and abandoned city fighting bosses and discovering collectibles. Early on in the game, you'll unlock the ability to fight, along with a designated button to strike downwards that was easily my favourite addition to the genre.

The world is vast, with numerous areas to explore. Throughout these are various collectibles to acquire, including ladybugs at the end of particularly arduous platforming sequences and useful relics that modify an aspect of your abilities. The exploration to find these is fun, and I really enjoyed the platforming elements, with onerous platforming reminiscent of Celeste; having finished it, I love the platforming aspects.

My main quarrel with the overworld exploration thus far, however, is the lack of guidance. Whether intentional to make the world feel vaster and to put the message of a lone fungus being lost in the world, I found myself constantly struggling to see where I was supposed to go next. Perhaps it's me being stupid, but the world felt far too vast and I felt far too tiny in it, making finding my way around a bit difficult, especially because I felt almost senseless and haphazard in my exploration. This isn't to say that it is bad in the slightest, as Lone Fungus' exploration is one of its greatest strengths thus far, but I do wish I had a semblance of an idea





about what I'm doing, what I'm supposed to do, and a clear goal early to understand what my purpose is.

While exploration is great, I'd also like to give massive props to Lone Fungus' fighting system. Although I like the exploration and platforming more — as a tremendous platformer enthusiast — the combat still stands out greatly; the controls make encounters, both common mob and bosses, extremely fun and comfortable. Not only is the combat smooth, but you also have numerous options of approach with varying relics to use to your advantage. The lone fungi cannot attack upwards due to the cap on its head, but it does fight expertly horizontally, with quick attacks that make fights feel fast-paced and exhilarating. Despite how great the fungus fights foes, horizontal combat does not compare to Lone Fungus' pogo jumping, which made a frustrating mechanic first explored in Hollow Knight all the better with quick attacks and a designated button to pogo that made the platforming challenges with it so much more exciting.

Now, if difficulty is more your thing, Lone Fungus has you covered on that front too; you can experience the title in four different difficulties, each with varying levels of toughness. Although I explored the game in Normal difficulty (due to being a newcomer to the title), I was intrigued by the increased challenge for both the Hardcore and Nightmare difficulties. At the moment, Hardcore removes almost half of your health bar disables boss health bars, forcing you to fight enemies completely blind. The extra challenges enticed me, and I can't wait to explore them further — I hope to eventually conquer Nightmare.

Lone Fungus feels like an amalgamation of Celeste and Hollow Knight, and I'm loving it so far. Although it is in Early Access at the moment, it is absolutely worth checking it out if you like the metroidvania genre or are itching for something to play while you wait for Silksong! Enjoyable ability-based exploration, platforming challenges to rival Celeste, and great combat await players that delve into the abandoned world of the fungi. ■

Vampire Survivors

By Alana Dunitz



Publisher: poncle
Developer: poncle
Genre: Action
Release Date: Out Now (Early Access)
Platform: PC, Xbox One, Xbox X|S



This month has been a great one for people who are subscribed to Xbox Game Pass. There are so many games that I haven't heard of that I have gotten a chance to try out because of this service! Vampire Survivors is a crazy bullet-hell game that is full of non-stop action. There are so many things I love about this game, the cool retro-inspired graphics, and just the craziness of it all.

There is no tutorial here so you have to figure this out for yourself, luckily the only thing you really need is the left thumbstick and the button to use your weapon. Based on the title screen it looks like you are wearing a green cloak and you are facing off against Dracula and a fairy type lady. Appearing in the first stage is a huge horde of bats, and your character is armed with a whip to take down all these enemies. You will notice that there is a slight cooldown period with the weapons, but as you collect the blue gems that the enemies drop; your character will level up and will be able to choose one of three different upgrades. Some of the options include making your whip stronger, wearing armour that will lessen the amount of

damage your character will take, spinach which makes all of your attacks 10% stronger, or new weapons like knives that fire at the enemy faster.

In each of your runs you are constantly attacked by hordes of enemies, some seem easy to beat like bats, but the longer you survive the stronger the





enemies that show up to fight you. After the bats, ghosts, skeletons, zombies, and even praying mantis' will come after you. What exactly you did to all these creatures to make them pissed off I don't know, but I'm sure they won't enjoy being hit by my whip, or flame attacks.

It may seem easy at first because the enemies are moving very slowly; but once 100 or more of these monsters fill your screen at the same time, it is incredibly easy to get overwhelmed. This is especially true if you are trying to collect the blue gems to level up or coins to buy new upgrades it can be tempting to get greedy and make the mistake of running into a clump of enemies. Keep an eye out for any enemies or torches that drop chicken, this replenishes your health so if you can safely grab it be sure to do so because everyone knows that random meat you find on the ground is always good! If you are going to get hit by multiple enemies by rushing in, just wait until the coast is

clear or you have cleared a path to get to it; no sense in taking a bunch of damage for an item that will just recover a tiny bit of health.

So far I am loving the craziness of Vampire Survivors; the longest run I have had is 10 minutes and 32 seconds, but I couldn't wait to jump in and try again. As you play you collect coins that you can spend in the main menu on upgrades for your character, so be sure to grab the coins and money bags that you see laying around the level to make yourself stronger. It was a lot of fun trying out all the different upgrades that you can get when you level up, and seeing which of the items I found were most effective while fighting the hordes. If you have Game Pass on the Xbox or the PC I highly recommend you go download the preview for Vampire Survivors, sure it's not the final game but it is a ton of fun and incredibly addictive! I love when I fall in love with a game I never expected to like! ■

Redout 2

By Alana Dunitz



Publisher: Saber Interactive

Developer: 34BigThings srl

Genre: Racing

Release Date: Out Now

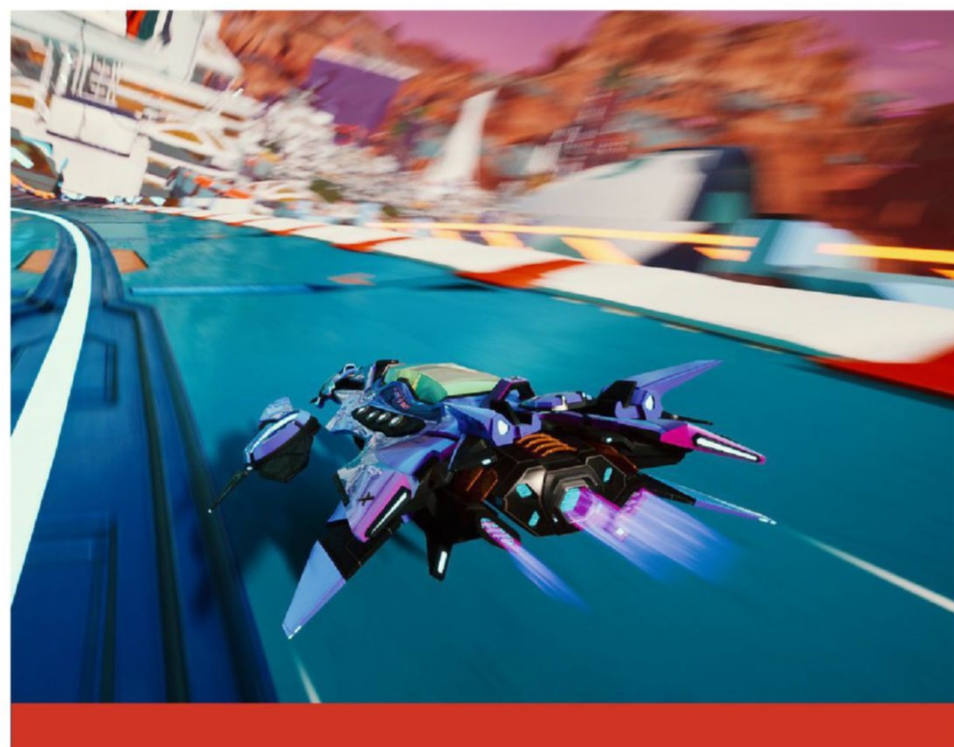
Platform: PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox X|S, Switch



In the future, anti-gravity racing is the most popular sport in the galaxy; no one wants to be stuck with their vehicles touching the ground! You are a pilot of these high-speed hover ships as you try to cross the finish line before your opponents and not take too much damage in the process. Redout 2 claims that it is the fastest racing game in the universe, and after playing it, I think they are right: the racing action is ridiculously fast! The goal is to become the Solar Redout Racing League champion, but it will take a lot of practise to get there!

Redout 2 takes everything you loved about the Wipeout and F-Zero series — the high adrenaline, action, and lightning-fast speeds — and combines it with gorgeous visuals and a fantastic original soundtrack to get your heart pumping. When you first start playing, the best thing you can do is play through the rookie academy in Career Mode. These tutorials will teach you how to steer, pitch, roll, and strafe. Once you have the basics figured out you will learn how to use boosting effectively. Use it too much, and your vehicle will overheat, and if you lose control and smash into walls or your

opponents, you will do damage to your hovercraft. Take too much damage and it will be destroyed meaning a replacement vehicle will have to be brought in, wasting precious time as your rivals will zip past you. But this could also mean the end depending on which race type you have chosen to play, as arena race doesn't let you respawn and the damage that your vehicle incurs will increase as time goes by, making this one of the most challenging types. Redout 2 has a couple of other race types that I have not seen in a game before that are really cool to try out: in Last Man Standing, each lap the speed increases and the driver in last



place is eliminated; Speed, like in the movie of the same name, requires you to stay over the target speed, and if you drop below and you will be destroyed; and Boss Mode has multiple tracks seamlessly combined together without any loading screens in between. I consider this last one a marathon mode!

In Redout 2 there are three different types of modes to play:

Career Mode — the main single-player experience; there are over 250 events to race through spread over 10 different locations and 36 unique racetracks. All of these tracks can also be played in reverse for a new experience, bringing the total to 72 tracks to race on.

Arcade Mode — throws you right into the racing action. All the above-mentioned tracks are available straight away along with all the different ships to race, there is no unlocking anything here.

Multiplayer — lets you race against other players online with up to 12 people racing at once. There will be regularly added custom content and seasons that reward you with bonus aesthetic items. Later in 2022, a ranked season will be available to play.

Redout 2 lets players select between six difficulty levels depending on their skill and how much of a challenge they want. There are sliders that can assist with any aspect of driving, like rolling in-flight or helping with pitching when you are on a slope. You can change these sliders at any time in the game settings. I've been playing with just the default settings and I'll warn you it is incredibly challenging, I think I may have to alter the settings a bit to lower the difficulty. Redout also has a garage where you can create your very own hover ship using one of the 12 base chassis then customising how it looks, and how it functions concentrating on the stats that matter more to you. Just a warning, if you focus only on increasing the »







speed you are going to have a hard time controlling that machine! With stabilisers, rocket engines, flaps, wings, spoilers, and paint to unlock you can create some pretty cool-looking vehicles!

Redout 2 is the crazy fast, anti-gravity racing game we have missed since playing Wipeout years ago and since Nintendo has been neglecting F-Zero. It looks beautiful, but it's really hard to take in the details of the scenery when you are driving upwards of 1000 km/h — if you take your eyes off the track chances are you will smash into something or fly right off into a pit of lava. The difficulty level here is quite high so if you jump in thinking you will do well because you have played racing games before, you may be disappointed; especially if you think you will be able to attack

your opponents with weapons like in Wipeout, as you will just have to use your boosts and manoeuvring skills to get past them. There are a lot of different things to keep track of when you are racing like using your strafe, pitch, and roll, and not overheating from using too many boosts — try to watch out for areas where you will need to jump across large chasms because if you don't use a boost the hovercraft will fall down to the world below. There is a ton here to do if you are willing to put in some practise hours by doing time trials and learning what you need to do to keep your speed up. Don't forget it's okay to let go of the gas or tap the brake when you are trying to go around a sharp turn, it's better than smashing into the side and damaging your vehicle! ■



Redout 2 is a beautiful-looking, anti-gravity racing game that has you driving at ridiculously fast speeds. This difficulty level is pretty high, but if you are willing to practise and hone your skills you will definitely be rewarded.

Seven Pirates H

By Andrew Duncan



Publisher: eastasiasoft
Developer: Compile Heart, Idea Factory
Genre: Role Playing Game
Release Date: Out Now
Platform: Switch



Ah, to be an ocean-faring pirate in an anime world... Sun, sea, monster girls, monsters shaped like genitals, monkey-like Booby Kins... Okay, so the second part of that sentence isn't like the first one is it...

Seven Pirates H is a JRPG by Felistella & Compile Heart, and published in the West by eastasiasoft. If you're a fan of Compile Heart like I am, you'll realise how weird it is that Idea Factory International didn't publish this title as it usually does, as the two companies do a lot of business together. However, while there is usually quite a bit of fanservice in Idea Factory games, it's usually just that and doesn't require you to level up characters by rubbing their breasts. That's an actual gameplay feature, and I'll get into that later.

Originally released under the title Genkai Tokki: Seven Pirates on the Vita, it was the fourth entry in the Genkai Tokki series after Monster Monpiece, Moero Chronicle, and Moero Crystal H, all developed by Compile Heart. Seven Pirates H doesn't continue a story from the others, and honestly is a different genre entirely since those

were dungeon crawlers. The only similarities are the aforementioned levelling up mechanic, and the fact that your team is made up of monster girls.

You play as the sole human in this adventure, Parute, a pirate who winds up in the Monsupi Sea somehow. She's convinced that she's been chosen to find some legendary treasures on account of a seemingly broken compass dropping on her head. She meets Otton, a boy monster (the apparent opposite to a monster girl) who helps make the compass work, and they begin their quest together. Along the way they meet many monster girls, some



of whom join the crew, six join you, while the others want to kill you for a handful of reasons.

As *Seven Pirates H* is a JRPG, that means you walk around levels getting into fights with monsters — sorry, H Monsters — which then pull you into turn-based battles. You can try and touch them from behind for a preemptive attack, but if the reverse happens they get to attack first. In battles you can attack, use skills, use items, defend, or try to escape; all pretty ordinary. Skills require MP (Mura-mura [sound effect for sexual attraction] points) which increase during fights or when using certain items. Once a character's MP reaches the maximum amount they enter Arousal Mode which boosts their attack, defence, and speed stats for five turns — it also allows them to use a powerful special move.

As you explore the Monsupi Sea you will need to complete tasks for the Booby Kin, the region's premiere shipbuilders who look like little monkeys. They also run shops and can craft things if you give them enough of certain items. You can locate Booby Kin in dungeons or just around the ocean, and the more you unlock the better equipment you can craft and items you can buy. They can also help out in battles by using MP to heal or cause positive and negative status effects.

The main thing you'll be using the Booby Kin for, however, is fulfilling their requests. Kill a certain amount of a particular enemy, pick up items littering dungeons, obtain items from fights that have a frustratingly low drop rate... All kinds of fun stuff that can be a bit repetitive due to those drop rates. Only some of the requests are directly





related to the main quest though, so you don't have to complete every one of them.

Okay, we're like 500 words into this review, so I should probably talk about touching breasts. Unlike most roleplaying games, *Seven Pirates H* doesn't have traditional levelling up. As you defeat H Monsters you get H Extract from them, and once you have enough (I'm still not sure how much that actually is) Otton will exchange it for Booby Training Extract. Using this and other Extract that you obtain from treasure chests and such, you go into the special Booby Training menu and grope each character in a variety of ways to increase their stats.

It's a little more nuanced than just randomly feeling up your pirates, and while you can use the analog sticks it's very clear the touchscreen is how you're

supposed to do it. I could list how each motion — flick, pinch, tap, press — alters the stats or explain how rotating clockwise increases or decreases the size of the breasts, but I honestly still can't remember. You can bring up the controls at any point which is great, because I had to look it up every time I wanted to increase HP or ATK stats. Did tapping increase the firmness or the softness? Did I have to pinch in or out for more cleavage? Not a clue. Suffice to say that bigger boobs means that they have more health, smaller ones increase their speed.

Equipment can also increase your stats as you find, buy, or craft bras and panties throughout your journey. Well, panties change stats, bras usually add a passive or battle skill. Don't worry, while they have different names and change different stats,

you don't actually see the characters wearing them. They have one set for Booby Training and that's as much as you get, even if you get a skill that increases stats if a character isn't wearing panties.

However, something I didn't realise until a few hours in is that increasing one stat in Booby Training doesn't decrease another one. So my team went from having torpedoes on their chests, because I wanted high health and attack, to having more naturally shaped breasts as I rounded out their stats.

Some of this might be down to the fact that the translation is imperfect. I thought that Arousal Mode caused your character to be knocked out and have to be revived, but they just enter a cooldown phase. The characters kept talking about a furnace

that was supposed to be something about magma? I'm pretty sure Poron is supposed to be a ghost, but everything about her says skeleton...

The music is a bit of a mixed bag, though all of it is pretty upbeat. Some of the tracks are fun to listen to over and over, but others made me want to get out of the menu or fight or whatever as quickly as possible.

The graphics are perfectly fine, though it's clear that if anything has changed since the Vita version it's minimal. The drop-in distance is the most obvious sign of it being an older game, for instance.

Okay, so the reason I think that eastasiasoft had to publish this in the West for Compile Heart is because Seven Pirates H is a horny game. I didn't







even touch on “Egg Break” where you find eggs as you explore dungeons and “hatch” them in Booby Training mode to get items (or cover your ladies in raw egg). Or Otton Charge, the ability required to finish off some bosses that charges by rubbing breasts vigorously (or tapping the A button). Or how Saqra’s Arousal skill vores the enemy. Or the fact that the H Monsters literally look like genitalia, condoms, secondary sexual characteristics, boxes of tissues... I could keep going, because there’s just so much of this — one of the monsters is a UFO

shaped like a breast, piloted by a smaller breast, with multiple breasts orbiting it!

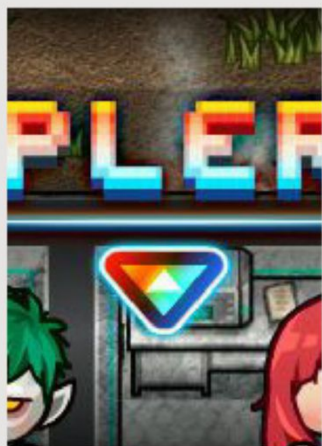
While Seven Pirates H clearly belongs in Horny Jail, that doesn’t make it a bad game. It may be somewhat poorly translated, levelling up may be repetitive and tiring, and some of the music could be better, but it’s actually pretty decent. A single playthrough will run you about 10 hours though, so at £34.99 it might be priced a little high if you only plan on playing through once.. ■



While not exactly breaking new ground in the genre, Seven Pirates H knows all of the notes well enough to do a decent job of it. And with all of the immature humour you’ll be laughing your tits off.

Keplerth

By Alana Dunitz



Publisher: Gamera Games

Developer: TARO

Genre: Adventure

Release Date: Out Now

Platform: PC



Survival games aren't a genre that I check out very often, but when I saw the trailer for Keplerth it made me want to try it out and see if I would be able to live longer than a couple days. The first thing you will do when you start Keplerth is design your own character. There is the option between male and female, and a variety of hairstyles and hair colours. Choose the name you would like to use for them and decide on a name for your world. I decided to go with Monster World because I knew that it was full of wild animals and monsters. After this step, you wake up in a hibernation pod with no idea who or where you are. You have no clothes, food, or anything else. The good news is you have the ability to gather resources like rocks, wood, and grass, to use to craft useful weapons and tools like clubs, axes, and torches. Any items you gather can be sold to some of the other residents of this strange planet. Some of the residents are friendly, but there are strange creatures that will attack you and your home base every night. As you leave the building you are in to explore the surroundings you find a broken-down robot, you turn him on and find out that his name is WM-69 and is there to help you out by giving you

the supplies he is carrying. He did with the same for his previous teammate named Danny, who was a strong red-haired gatherer who would go out to collect supplies for the survivors. One day a portal opened up in the ground and two robed characters jumped out, taking her down with their laser-like blades and jumping back into the portal they came from, taking Danny with them and slashing WM-69 before leaving.

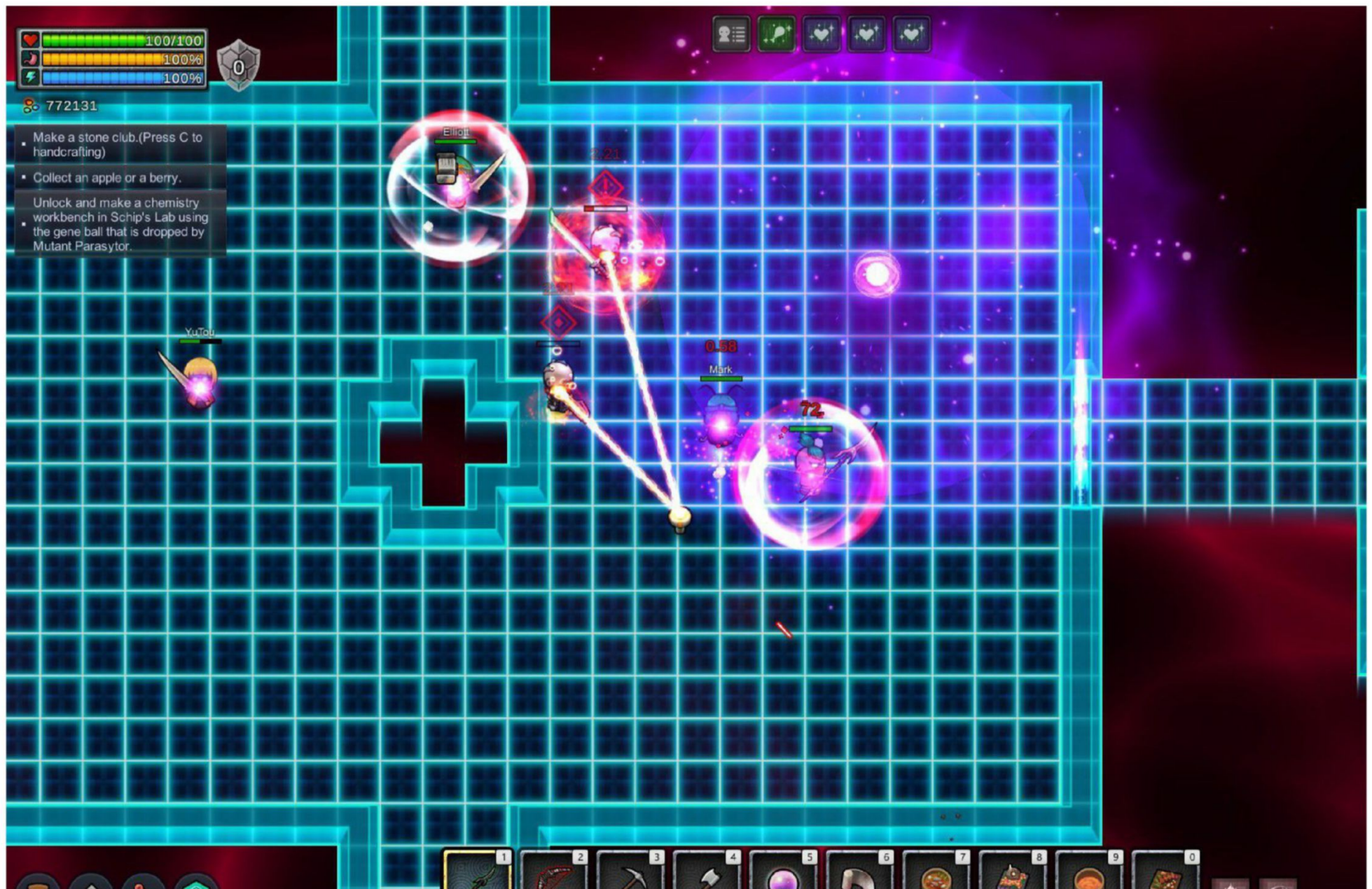
You have the opportunity to ask WM-69 about this planet and the things that have occurred here. He tells you stories about the Mecos that live here and how they were responsible for kidnapping Danny. She is an immigrant from Earth and had the skills to repair MK-69's malfunction that made the Mecos throw him into the garbage. Since he was in offline mode, his combat mode has been disabled, so he asks you to help him save Danny. If you don't agree he will just sit and wait for her to return and save him. When you agree to help he gives you a key card that lets you use the portals around the world to travel to different areas like your home base, or to Schip's lab. Matthew Schip is Danny's employer, he has plans for building a spacecraft to

get off of this planet, but to do this he requires a lot of supplies. Since that was Danny's job and she's missing, he gives you the task of gathering resources for him. The nice thing is he will pay you for your efforts, and lets you buy armour and other supplies you will need.

If you are a fan of survival games like Don't Starve, or Rimworld, Keplerth may be a title you will be interested in. I'm not usually the biggest fan of games in this genre, but after my first few minutes of being super frustrated wondering why I kept dying, even though I was punching the enemy, I discovered how to craft weapons. Everything changed once I was armed with a stone axe and able to hold my own against those creatures. Having these crafted weapons can allow you to explore the world around your home base and

even discover other bases that you could set as your new starting checkpoint. This way if you die you won't be sent to the very beginning, just the last checkpoint you had saved at. When you die you don't lose all of your items, you are just taken back to that point to restart.

The game has its own time system, so depending on the time of day the sun will set and it will get dark. This is when Keplerth gets scary; if you don't have a torch, campfire, or building with lights to hide in, it is impossible to see, and to make things worse this is when the monsters and wild animals like to come out to attack you. There were multiple times I was lost in the dark getting hit, and only knew the direction the enemy was in based on the red text showing how many HP I was losing. So it is beneficial to find shelter when it is getting later in



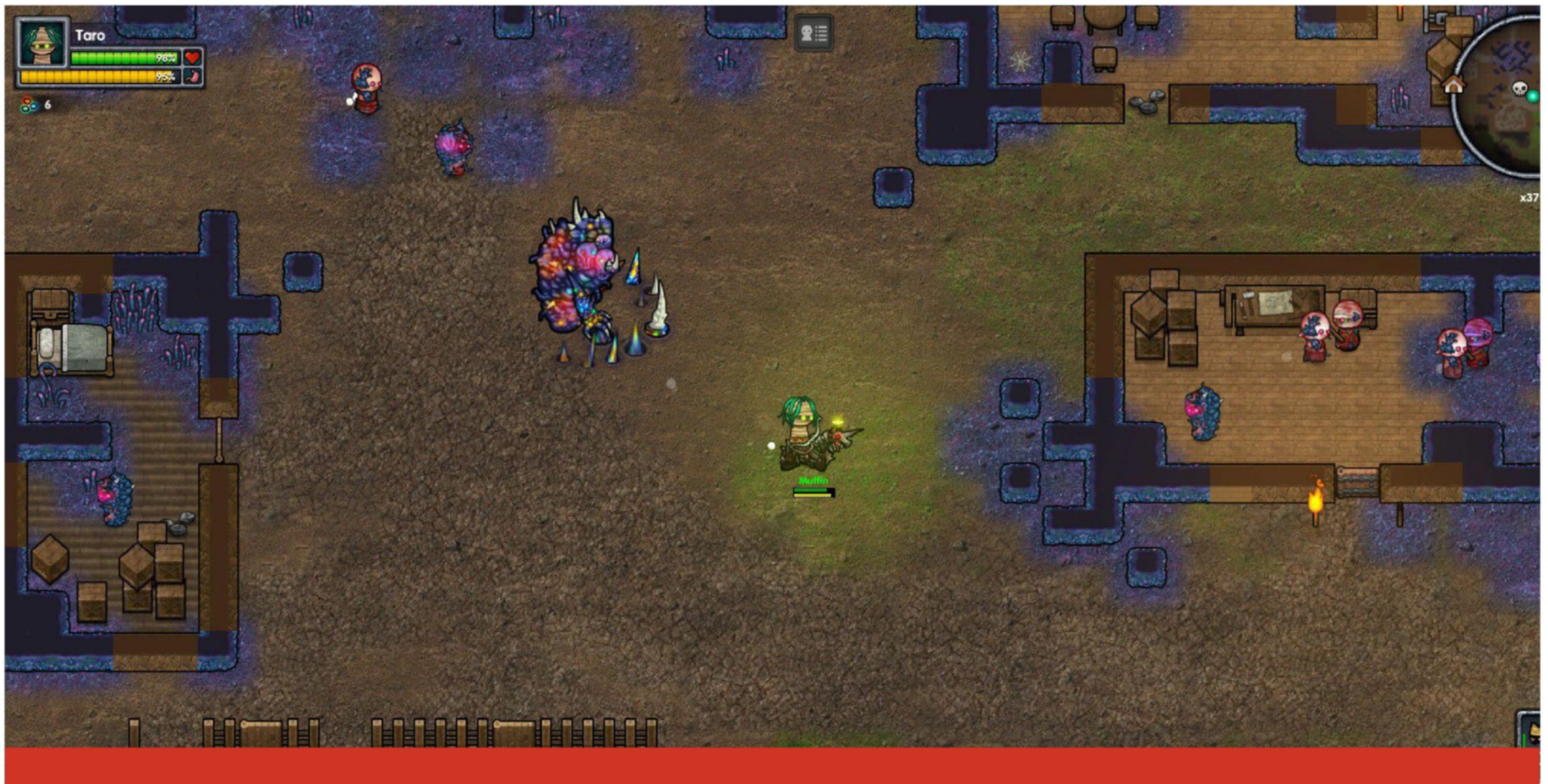
the day, or equip yourself with some sources of light so you at least can see where you are going. I was always happy when the sun would slowly start coming up so I could continue my search for more materials, food, and new bases.

Your character needs to eat to survive, so when your satiety meter gets too low a small icon of a stomach will pop up over your character's head. When this happens you have to go through your backpack to see everything you have gathered to see what kind of food you can eat as if you don't eat your character's movement and attack speed will slow down. Fruit like apples and berries are always easy to find, or the meat you get from wild animals that you kill works too. Keep in mind some of this food will replenish your health and satiety at the same time, so only use the items like the fruit when

you have the health that needs to replenish too, or else it will be a waste. Some of the food items have negative effects too like slowing your character down for 20 seconds, or attracting wild animals, so be sure to read all the text!

As you collect materials and defeat enemies you will collect special items that will give you the ability to modify your genes and improve the stats of your character. Some upgrades will let your character move faster, or perform stronger attacks, and you can even get special power-ups for your pets to give them more strength or health. These gene modules can give you traits of a protector, thug, iron man, ghost, gambler, shooter, host, or assistant, so you can really customise your character to have the traits that you want.





This isn't even touching on everything that you can do in Keplerth — there is so much to see and do, this game will keep you busy for a very long time. Especially when you get to the point where you can start your own farm, plant crops, and tame animals. Even though Keplerth has more simplistic graphics and soundtrack, the gameplay is incredibly addicting. I never would have guessed I would become so obsessed with a survival game before trying this one out, it makes me want to go back to other titles like Don't Starve and give it a second chance. If you don't want to venture out on your own there is the option to play cooperatively, or if you are feeling creative head to the Uninhabited Island and design to your heart's

content. This isn't connected to anything in the story but it's just fun to play and design your island as you want.

I highly recommend anyone who enjoys survival games or loves to craft weapons and farm check out Keplerth. There is so much to do here it's going to take a long time before you get bored! If you are unsure about playing survival titles, this may be the gateway drug for you; it sure got me hooked! I just wish the game would let you know ahead of time that the bottom row of boxes is where you want to place the weapons or items you will be using as it took me way too long to figure this out. ■



Keplerth is a great 2D survival game that is so deep and has so much to do it will keep you busy for a long time! I just wish it had a little more direction at times, but either way, exploring and figuring things out yourself is so addictive!

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge

By Mike Crewe



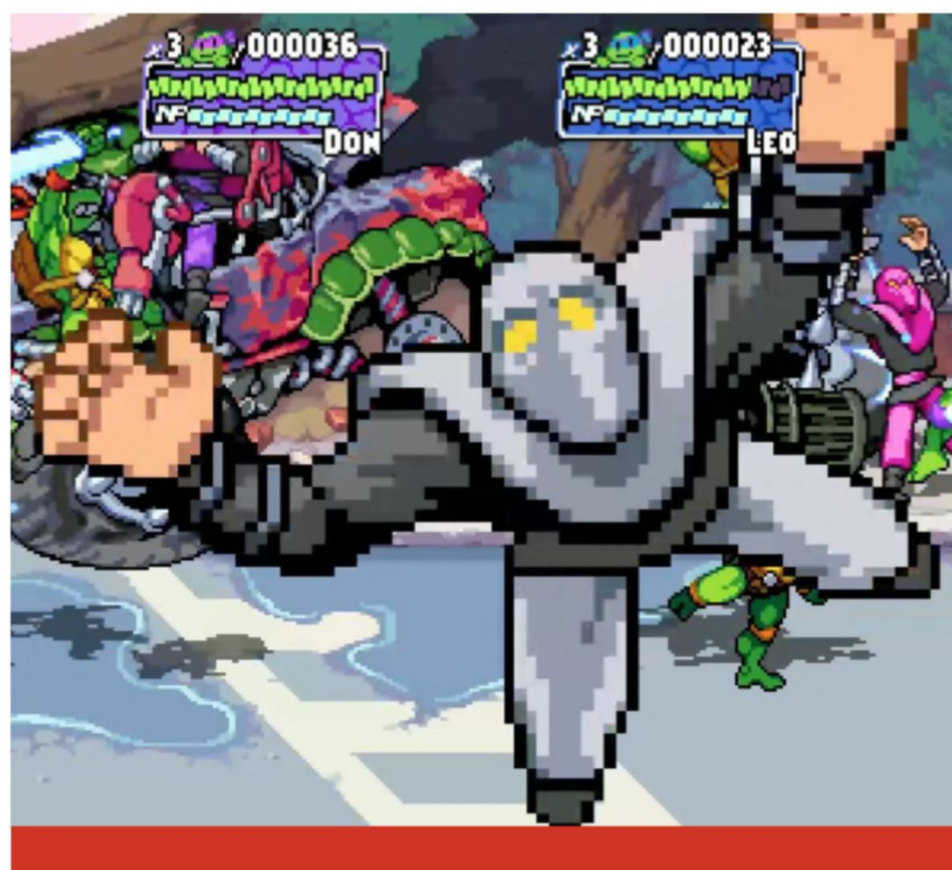
Publisher: DotEmu
Developer: Tribute Games Inc.
Genre: Fighting
Release Date: Out Now
Platform: PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch



As a big TMNT fan growing up in the '90s, I've been waiting for the release of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge since it was announced in March 2021. With a few members of the development team at Tribute Games having worked on the incredible Scott Pilgrim vs. the World, and publisher Dotemu (who have previously published titles such as Streets of Rage 4, another great beat 'em up), this was bound to be a smash hit oozing with nostalgic charm, right? Let's find out if this title can live up to the hype!

With TMNT: Shredder's Revenge being a modern-day take on the late '80s/early '90s classics in the franchise, it's safe to say that the story here isn't the focal point. The opening moments see Bebop and Rocksteady causing havoc (as usual!) at Channel 6, so it's up to you and a team of up to five other players to kick some shell whilst exploring well-known locations from the series, with an all-star cast of baddies to beat up!

The visuals are on-point with that retro look, but made with modern TVs/monitors in mind. Animations are slick, combos are flashy, and character models are faithful to the original series. Pixel art has never looked so good! Whether you're smacking Foot Clan goons whilst on your hoverboard or dodging herds of stampeding zoo animals, each environment pops with colour and





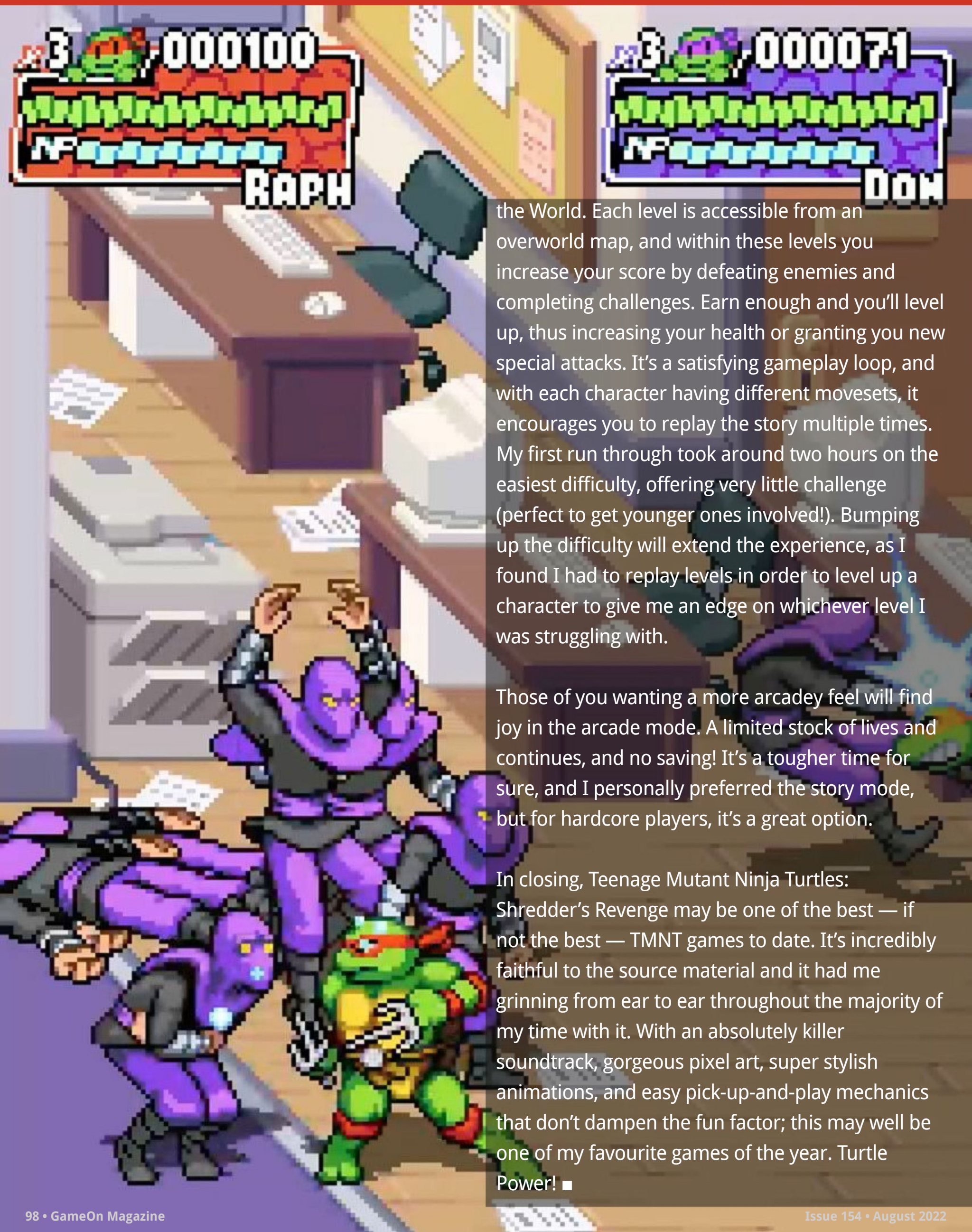
detail that really gives the game that classic cartoon vibe.

The audio is an absolute perfect 10 for me. The remixed opening theme of the 1987 cartoon is an absolute banger, a modern take on the classic, with some seriously heavy drum beats that had me excited before I'd even started a new game! Another huge positive is that the original voice cast for the half-shell heroes return, and combined with overly dramatic sound effects and a suitably radical soundtrack (including a particularly hard-hitting track from members of Wu-Tang Clan!) TMNT: Shredder's Revenge should be included in every "Best Audio" category in this year's various Game of the Year awards.

Gameplay is the main draw here — like the majority of beat 'em up titles — and oh boy is it an absolute blast. Not only from start to finish, but then again and again, with so much replayability and so many challenges to conquer you'll be glad it isn't an arcade machine rinsing you of all your cash.

It's also really simple to play; one button is for your standard attack moves (as well as a charged attack), one to unleash a special move — usable once a meter has been fully charged — one for jumping, and another to dodge. Using these in combination with one another will unleash some very satisfying combos, with more abilities being unlocked as you level up in story mode.

Now, story mode will be familiar to anyone that's played the previously mentioned Scott Pilgrim vs. »



the World. Each level is accessible from an overworld map, and within these levels you increase your score by defeating enemies and completing challenges. Earn enough and you'll level up, thus increasing your health or granting you new special attacks. It's a satisfying gameplay loop, and with each character having different movesets, it encourages you to replay the story multiple times. My first run through took around two hours on the easiest difficulty, offering very little challenge (perfect to get younger ones involved!). Bumping up the difficulty will extend the experience, as I found I had to replay levels in order to level up a character to give me an edge on whichever level I was struggling with.

Those of you wanting a more arcadey feel will find joy in the arcade mode. A limited stock of lives and continues, and no saving! It's a tougher time for sure, and I personally preferred the story mode, but for hardcore players, it's a great option.

In closing, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge may be one of the best — if not the best — TMNT games to date. It's incredibly faithful to the source material and it had me grinning from ear to ear throughout the majority of my time with it. With an absolutely killer soundtrack, gorgeous pixel art, super stylish animations, and easy pick-up-and-play mechanics that don't dampen the fun factor; this may well be one of my favourite games of the year. Turtle Power! ■



Like the last slice of pizza, Shredder's Revenge is worth savouring every last second of. A fun, nostalgia-fueled adventure that every fan of these radical dudes has to play!

Starship Troopers: Terran Command

By Alana Dunitz



Publisher: Slitherine Ltd.
Developer: The Artistocrats
Genre: Strategy
Release Date: Out Now
Platform: PC



If you grew up in the 90s, or enjoy sci-fi movies, chances are you have viewed or at least heard of the movie *Starship Troopers*. The first movie was released back in 1997 and is based on a novel written by Robert A. Heinlein in 1959, about a civilisation where people who are at least 18 years old enlist in the military to be considered a good citizen, thus earning them the right to vote or run for political office. The wars that they are fighting aren't on Earth; the battles they are fighting are in space against extraterrestrial arachnid creatures on the planet of Klendathu. These aren't the bugs that we are used to seeing here, as not only are they massive, but they possess advanced technologies like spaceships; they won't be exterminated easily.

Starship Troopers: Terran Command is a real-time strategy game that takes place in the same universe as the movies with you taking on the role of a commander. The story is told using FedNetTV, an app that fills people in on the latest news and accomplishments of the federation to try and influence the residents on Earth to enlist and join

the journey of citizenship. The Battle of Klendathu is the first special broadcast; however, instead of just observing it, you are living it as a commander of one of the troops in the fight. There are multiple difficulty options to select, ranging from very easy to brutal depending on how familiar you are playing real-time strategy titles, with each of these having a different damage modifier to make things a bit easier or challenging for you. This setting can be changed at the beginning of each of the battles so you don't get stuck if you are finding it too easy or hard, which is a nice addition. The game will auto-save whenever you complete an objective, but also allows you to save at any point in time if you need to leave the game or if you want to have a backup file that won't automatically be saved over.

You control the Mobile Infantry and other troops using the keyboard and mouse. The arrow keys will move your overhead camera so you can view different areas of the battlefield and you will use the mouse to control the units of soldiers. To move the troops left-click on the group that you want to



move, then right-click on the location that you want them to go to. There is a limited radius of how far you can go each move, so it may take a few times to get them where you want, but your soldiers move pretty fast so it's not much of a problem. The troops shoot automatically as soon as an enemy comes within view — this can be changed in the settings if you want to control when they fire — so you just have to keep track of where the enemy is and move towards them or pull back if needed. The first mission acts as a tutorial showing you how to navigate the map to complete the objectives assigned to you, these objectives need to be completed to move on. In case you didn't notice, there is a map on the bottom left-hand side of the screen that shows your targets and where to go with a star, in case you feel lost. Some of the objectives have the soldiers destroying huge groups

of bugs, the hives that they spawn from, or escort missions where you have to keep miners safe while they head back to the mines to work. To assist you in these missions you will have the ability to call in backup troops to increase your numbers, and for more specialised soldiers like engineers who can build turrets or snipers that can accurately shoot from long distances.

Between the missions, you will see animated movies on FedNetTV showing you the battle against the arachnids and information about the next fight you will take part in. These movies have a cool-hand drawn look to them which feels unique compared to other games. To accompany this is dramatic battle music that gives you the feeling that every fight against the bugs is important and could be your last if you aren't careful. Don't





forget that the arachnids have a massive army compared to the humans so it is very easy to get overwhelmed if you get too confident and sloppy.

I don't usually play a lot of real-time strategy games, but I've had a great time playing Starship Troopers: Terran Command; I'm enjoying the videogame a lot more than the movie actually! I feel like I'm part of the action and fighting alongside all of the recruits to take down the

hordes of insects trying to take over the galaxy. This is a must-play title for fans of the movie or RTS games with multiple difficulty settings to choose from. Plus getting the chance to destroy nasty bugs with weapons is always a fun time! Will you lead your infantry to victory and exterminate the insect army, or will you be overwhelmed and destroyed by the alien enemy? ■



Starship Troopers: Terran Command is a great real-time strategy game that has you leading your troops to victory against the arachnid alien forces trying to take over the galaxy. The multiple difficulty settings make it accessible to anyone who wants to destroy bugs!



Eternal Threads

By Artura Dawn



Humanity has finally cracked the secret for time travel, though it came at a price; the world's latest Pandora's Box, choral radiation, swept through the timeline and caused seemingly insignificant decisions to change. The result? An Earth ravaged by radioactive waste. It is up to you, a member of "The Second Chance Project", to restore time itself, one mundane decision at a time.

I'll get this out of the way: *Eternal Threads* is far more a narrative adventure than a puzzle title. In the game, you sit through 197 Events (121 in the Abridged version, though we'll get to that later) and see the lives of six people who died in a fire in 2016 when none of them should have. You must watch their lives unfold in order to prevent their death by altering decisions to find the important choices that change the course back to the correct timeline.

As mentioned before, there are two game modes in *Eternal Threads*, one that has 197 Events and 54 total Decisions to alter, while the other has a measly 121 Events and 37 Decisions. Although it might seem tempting for those with less time than

others to invest in the title, the Abridged version feels like an insult to the unique *Eternal Threads* experience, and I'd sincerely advise against experiencing the game in this mode first. Not only will you not get the full story — as the Abridged mode locks out pivotal decisions to get the best ending, secrets, and even sections of the house — but you miss out a lot on the entire gameplay aspect. If you're going to play the Abridged mode, you might as well skip the title.

The gameplay is simple, and it certainly won't be everyone's cup of tea: you sift through each event, watching as the characters (Tom, Raquel, Linda, Neil, Jenny, and Ben) live their life, and choose some of the more critical decisions. These decisions can alter things later down the timeline, often several events and a couple of days after, that you will need to rewatch and see how the story unfolded differently. Ultimately, your goal is to ensure that the house fire that occurs fails to kill any member, though you cannot stop the fire in and of itself, as it is a pivotal moment in the timeline.

Accomplishing this is relatively simple, and it is what will either make or break *Eternal Threads* for players; the difficulty of the title doesn't feel significant, and the tasks might become mundane for the more impatient gamers. You will navigate through a week of their lives (with a very informative HUD that I loved) back and forth and watch the same event to see how it changed and how that might affect something later down the line. *Eternal Threads* feels more like a *The Second Chance Project Simulator* title in which you take a day in the job of a person, and that's a good thing; this game doesn't need to be anything else because it is excellent at what it does. Walking through the house and watching the characters interact is a unique experience, but it isn't one for everyone.

The mundane aspect of *Eternal Threads* is one of its most extraordinary charms, as you really walk around the house and get to know the characters. Scattered throughout the numerous rooms are objects that hint at the lives of each personality outside of the week you get to spend with them; it isn't something important to do, but it certainly adds to the game's depth.

Each character's acting felt decent enough, though sometimes their voice-over didn't feel particularly immersive. That said, it never really affected my gameplay, as it was a unique experience and — due to the individual Events being so short — often passed by in a blur, and I got lost in the sea of the other 100+ events that I had to go through. The environment of the burnt house, the voice-overs, and the fact that I could only see the characters





through a holographic image added a tint of emptiness; a post-apocalyptic feel captured perfectly through graphics.

Eternal Threads is a unique experience, one that — in terms of gameplay — you've both never played before and might never again. Living throughout the week with these characters and witnessing their stories unfold was a distinctive experience and one I'd recommend for anyone who likes story-driven

narratives. That said, that really is the extent of the title's gameplay; the lack of combat sequences, puzzle elements, or even interaction with the characters from a personal perspective might make this experience a bit dull for some gamers. ■



Eternal Threads is a wholly unique experience and one that I definitely recommend. That said, outside of snooping in the lives of six unsuspecting strangers there's not really any other elements to rope in gameplay-heavy players.



Souldiers

By Alana Dunitz



Publisher: Dear Villagers

Developer: Retro Forge

Genre: Action, Adventure

Release Date: Out Now

Platform: PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox X|S, Switch



I've been looking forward to Souldiers ever since I tried the demo that was available on Steam Next Fest. I adore metroidvania-style games and 2D platformers with exploration and a few RPG-like elements; sign me up! The problem was, when I first started playing it, I hit a game-breaking bug; no matter how many times I retried playing it, when I got about 20 minutes in and when I received the map, the game totally froze up. I wasn't the only person having issues, so developer Retro Forge announced an update that would deal with problems like this, along with other concerns people had. Update v1.1.1 is now here and I can't wait to jump back in!

Souldiers starts with a really cool animated intro that shows you some of the characters you will meet on your journey. This short movie got me super excited to try it out; if the dev team spent this much time creating this intro, chances are they took their time on the main game itself. As soon as you start a new game, you select how much of a challenge you want based on if you would rather explore, fight while exploring, or use everything available to you to survive (this is recommended

for experienced soldiers). If you decide to go for the Explorer difficulty I can promise you that there will still be tons of puzzles to solve and enemies to battle to test you.

You play as a soldier in the nation of Zarga, one of the three that rule the continent of Ascii. The Royal Council is debating the best strategy to deal with the imminent war. After a few hours of discussion, the King has decided that they will follow the positioning set by General Brigard. The Council is set to leave when Arkzel (the King's advisor and sorcerer) proposes a change of strategy; we already





know that this can't be good. The scene then switches to soldiers waiting in a grotto; originally General Brigard's strategy had them fighting along with the others, but now he tells them to stand firm and wait. They are waiting for Dadelm's army to come marching down the hill, but suddenly the ground starts shaking, the earthquake traps them between two mountains, and the world opens up beneath them, plunging them into darkness. Suddenly, a glowing beam appears in the dark: it is a Valkyrie who has come to take them to the next life. The soldiers are in disbelief as they are sure that they are still alive and will rejoin the rest of the army when they get out. She can see in the palm of her hand that their lifeline ended when they were trapped; there is something more powerful holding them back, the rocks aren't the only thing keeping them there. They have the choice between

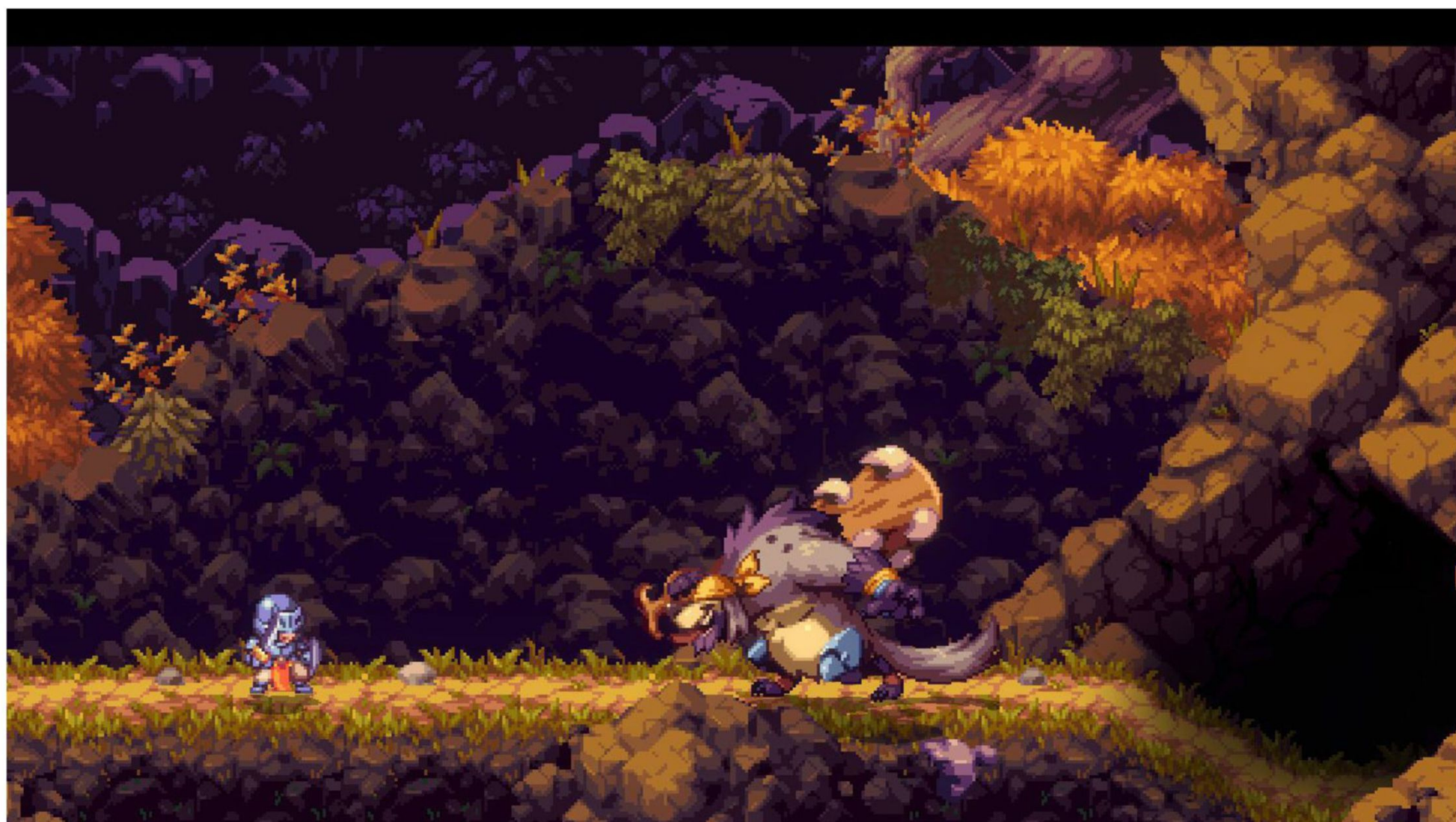
following her or turning into dust while they remain stuck in the cave, so they decide to follow. Souldiers is not a narrative-heavy game, but the story that is here is very compelling and makes you want to solve the mystery of what happened to get these soldiers here and see what will become of them.

At this point, you must choose your class from the available options of Scout, Archer, and Caster. Each class has its own unique stats: Scouts have the most health with four out of five stars but have the lowest mana at one, Archers have a health rating of three and attack of two but they have the benefit of having ranged attacks, and Caster has a two for health but a five for mana and have a magic projectile that hits enemies. I decided to go with the Caster class as I really liked the ability to have magic attacks that fire projectiles — like homing ➤

torpedoes — and big magic attacks that can cause major damage if your movements are timed well. As you level up, your character will learn new moves and spells depending on which class you selected and what power-ups you select on the stat tree to level up your soldier.

Souldiers is a beautiful-looking game — the graphics remind me of some of the best games on the SNES! The character animations are really fluid and look very smooth in this classic pixel art style. The platforming and combat work great; the controls are very responsive, and as you level up there are multiple skills that you can teach to your character. Souldiers isn't only beautiful with great level designs, it sounds amazing too. The soundtrack reminds me of other great titles on the Super Nintendo like Final Fantasy VI, it's so good it's one I would want to listen to when I'm not playing the game!

As you explore this new world, other soldiers that you know will give you advice and items to help you on your way. Two of the guys you come across were in charge of making a map of the Spider Cave, but when they discovered all the spiders hiding deep in the cave they were too scared to keep exploring to finish the map, so instead, they gave it to you to finish as you explore the rest of the cave. This is where the game froze for me when I first tried playing it, but now with the update, I didn't have any issues at all and I was able to finish finding all the secrets hidden within this grotto. The puzzles that I came across were challenging but not impossible to solve— they definitely worked my brain! Once you enter a dungeon, you are trapped inside until you find the solution to get out, but once you do you can travel to the other dungeons you have been to before and new ones you have yet to explore. Each of these dungeons has treasures hidden in secret passages that make it





worth spending the time to find them hidden in the walls. Some of the items will really help you on your journey through this new mysterious world and the obstacles holding you back.

I am so glad that Retro Forge decided to put out this update and fix the issues that popped up because this is such a good title; it would have been a shame if people never got a chance to try it, or were turned off from the mixed reviews on the

Steam page. I can assure anyone who was on the fence about picking up Souldiers because of those comments that, with the update, this is a title that is worthy of being added to your library. If you enjoy action-adventure metroidvania games with great graphics and a kick-ass soundtrack this is one you need to try; someone needs to figure out what evil is holding the soldiers back from going back to their own world! ■

10

Souldiers is a must-play title for anyone who loves metroidvania-style games with RPG and platforming elements thrown in. Despite a few hiccups at launch, v1.1.1 addresses all the issues, making this gorgeous-looking and -sounding game one you shouldn't miss!

F1 22

By Steven Dawson

**Publisher:** Electronic Arts**Developer:** Codemasters**Genre:** Racing**Release Date:** Out Now**Platform:** PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox X|S

For all of the previous iterations of F1 that I've reviewed, I've often pondered how the next title in the franchise will improve or what new features will be added. However, this year a sizable chunk of that questioning has been taken up by the new cars. A new aerodynamic profile means that the racing is closer and harder than it has ever been, making for much more exciting racing the likes of which we've seen in the real world version of the sport. Codemasters, to their credit, has been hard at work implementing the new cars, along with a significant rework of the underlying physics systems to ensure that the experience is a good one when driving the new model. They've also added a long term player request with support for VR but all these changes have come with a price.

Notably, this iteration of F1 doesn't feature anything in the way of a narrated story mode like "Braking Point" from F1 2021. A shame, as I found myself wholly engrossed by the story despite its linearity — and had quietly hoped for more of the same. That said, the improvements to the rest of

the title more than make up for the omission of a story. So onwards to those instead.

First and foremost are the new cars, and the tyre and physics models that go with them, arguably





being the most important aspect of this year's title. A significant amount of development time was taken to ensure that they got it right; having raced around the many circuits (more on these later) in F1 22, the cars certainly feel more stable overall, and in practice allowed me to push a bit harder during racing with more confidence.

Something of a game changer this year is the inclusion of native VR support, allowing you to virtually don a helmet for the ultimate immersive experience when it comes to F1. What's most apparent is the sense of speed these cars get to in such a short space of time, something that flatscreen gaming traditionally struggles with when it comes to racing games. Being able to have a look around, check your mirrors, and point yourself to

the apex of a turn with more consistency really aids with the lap times.

Most other aspects of the game have been given a bit of a polish up too — both on and off the track. With the recent real-world changes to Australia, Spain, and Abu Dhabi, these have also been reflected in-game, along with season newcomer Miami making its debut in virtual form also. Quite the achievement, given the track wasn't even finished in the real world until days before the race there, that its inclusion in the game was even possible. There's also new pit- and safety car-based updates, in which you can move to a "broadcast" mode, that has the game take over control and run you through a pitstop or follow the safety car as if you were watching the race on TV. It's a great feature for those that don't want the more



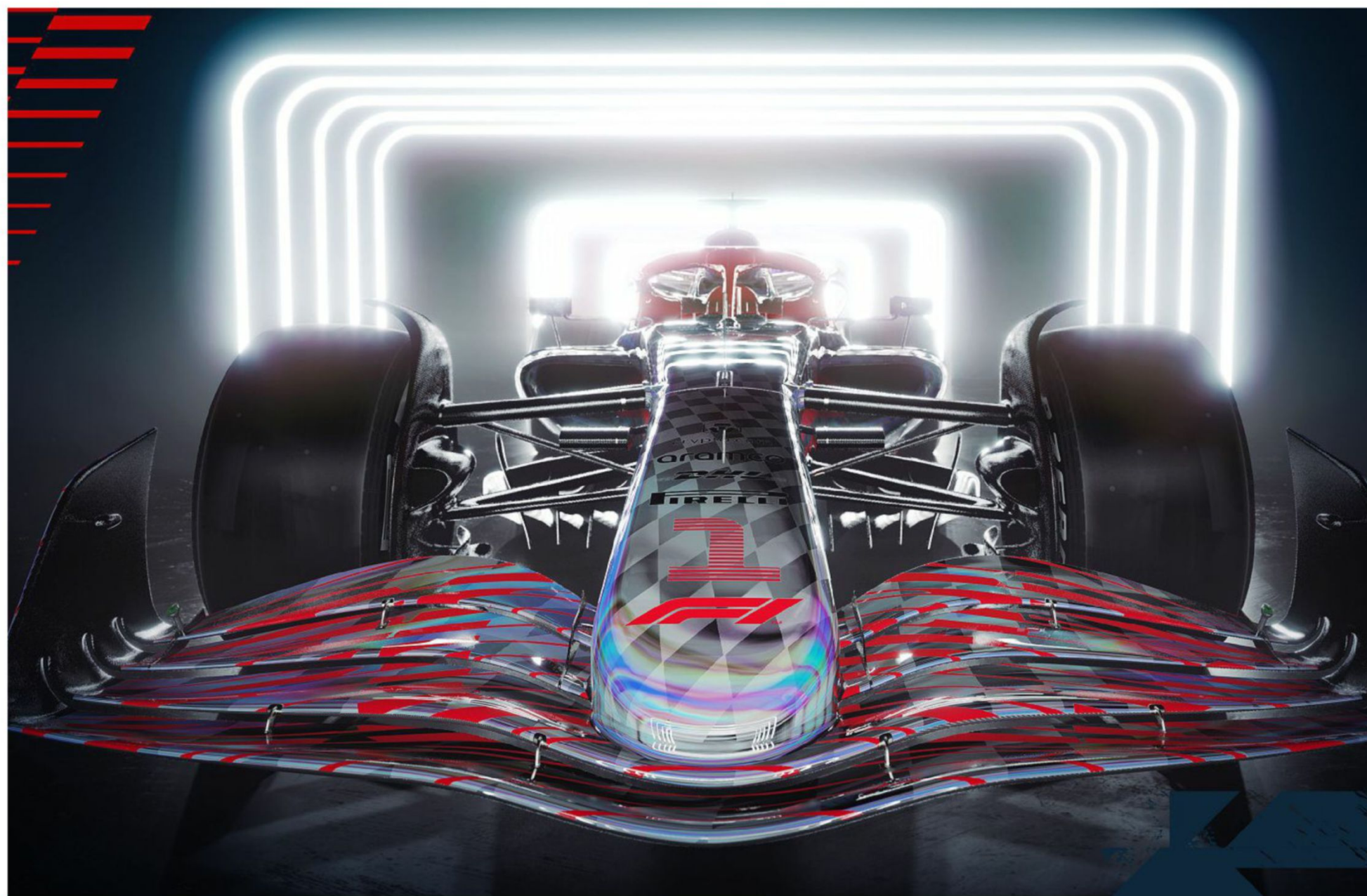
technical aspects of driving through the pits, or find they don't want to have to follow the safety car around the track, but still want to see the race happening live. Track practice in career also gets an upgrade with new programmes to gain points for research and development teams back in the garage.

Graphically, the EGO engine still looks as stunning as ever, with tracks raced at night under floodlights still taking the graphical spotlight as it were — the lighting in this engine really is a delight to behold when it comes to this scenario.

The engine noises from the cars are also incredibly detailed, with slight nuances between each team's engine due to how they're set up differently from one another and how that noise escapes from the

body of the car. Also, whilst you can opt to listen to the brilliant Formula One theme by Brian Tyler, for the first time F1 has a fully licensed soundtrack featuring well known artists like deadmau5, Charli XCX and Diplo, to name a few.

Lastly, the elephant in the room — "F1 Life". In this you'll be able to customise your character with various clothes and items for your virtual avatar's home space, including buying some supercars with which to adorn your space. These supercars also feature in Pirelli Hot Lap events, which have you driving timed laps, autocross through narrow gates, drifting and checkpointing your way to (additional) successes. Before F1 22 launched, there was quite a bit of a stir around these aspects of the game — "will they/won't they", and it was seen as a watering down of the core F1 appeal. However, having had





some time with the mode, and whilst also noting that some of the customisations are monetised, it can be avoided if you don't want any part in it and just concentrate on the racing and career aspects.

The main idea is to bring yourself more into the headspace of a top F1 driver that happens to have a house large enough to contain multiple supercars within its floorspace. But, whilst you'll still unlock some cosmetics and grab some supercars

throughout normal play, it's exactly that: cosmetic. There appears to be no gameplay modifying aspects of the feature, leaving it for those of you who like to go head-first into collecting everything a game has to offer.

Overall though, my time so far with F1 22 has been yet another great experience with the franchise and I look forward to my continued time with it. ■



Although slightly saddened by the omission of a story mode this time around, it's more than made up for by the new vehicle physics. The concern of "F1 Life" having any bearing on gameplay being quashed makes F1 22 another flying lap for Codemasters.

TEN - Ten Rooms, Ten Seconds

By Alana Dunitz



Publisher: Ratalaika Games S.L.

Developer: The Bworg

Genre: Action

Release Date: Out Now

Platform: PC, PS4, PS5 Xbox One, Xbox X|S

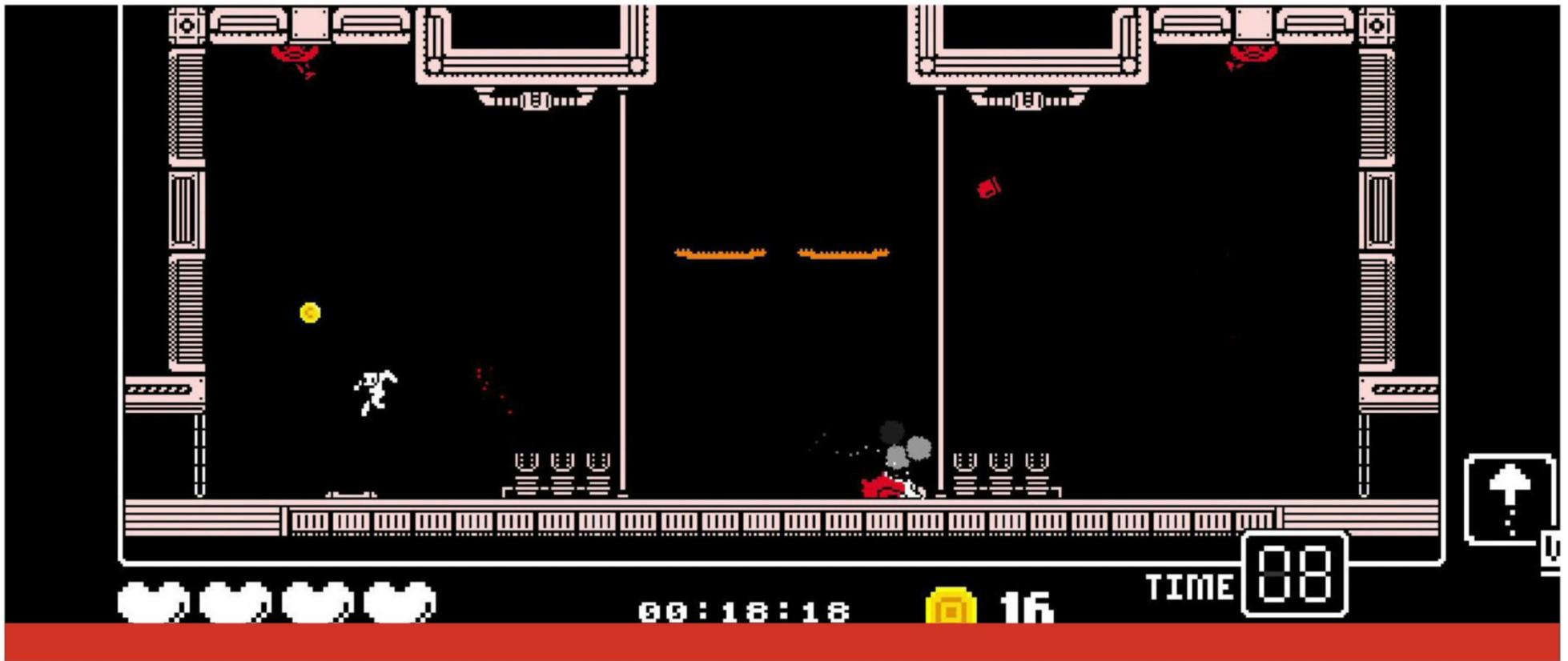


I have always been a huge fan of platformer games, especially challenging precision platforms; there's nothing like the sense of achievement you get after you successfully complete a tricky level. When I was introduced to the indie title TEN - Ten Rooms, Ten Seconds with its pixel graphics, black and white colouring, and awesome music, I figured this would be a game I would try my best to tackle.

The premise is simple: in each room you have to survive for 10 seconds, and each floor has 10 rooms including a boss fight in the last one. When you start TEN you have three difficulties to choose from; even on the easiest setting TEN was challenging and had me cursing under my breath — not because the game was unfair, I just got sloppy. Staying alive for 10 seconds sounds easy but when lasers cut through the level and other enemies are shooting at you at the same time, it gets intense. At least your character starts off with four hearts so you can take a bit of damage before you have to try again.

TEN consists of 10 floors, each with a unique theme, and some sound quite evil! The saw-themed level is particularly bad, as not only do saw blades come at you from the front but they also bounce towards you — and not just one blade, but multiple ones. Or they follow an invincible track that goes around the perimeter of the level, trying to pin you in a corner. My favourite floor is filled with water, so you get to pilot a submarine shooting torpedoes at enemies in order to survive the hazards that are waiting to take you out.

Once you beat the boss, you jump onto the elevator and go up to the next floor. Each floor has a rest area where you can recover your health and spend any coins that you managed to collect on power-ups for your character. There are four different rows of upgrades, and the items need to be purchased in order, so buying the first item will unlock the second one in that same row and so on. Some of these will help you out a lot on your journey — having extra hearts is always handy, the double jump is great, and adrenaline to make you



move faster is a bonus. The item that sounds the coolest is the action hero, having the bullets move slowly so you can look cool when you dodge them sounds pretty awesome! On your journey you meet characters who are also challenging the floors, but the weird thing is they look exactly the same as you. No one seems totally sure as to why they are there, but you learn more of the story if you read the logs on each of the floors.

Considering how simplistic TEN looks, the pixel graphics look great. Each level has a different layout, and a variety of hazards to get in your way or outright kill you. The last floor of the game has a really cool-looking boss and crazy forced scrolling horizontal and vertical sections that will keep you on your toes and challenge you — thankfully the game replenishes your health after you complete

each section! The music in TEN is great, it's high energy and really fits with the chaos of the levels. I never got tired of it, even when I had to challenge the levels multiple times. I was always excited to try the next level to see what super-catchy music would play and what hazards were waiting for me!

If you love games that challenge you and require precision platforming, TEN is a title that you should check out. Chances are it won't take you too many hours to complete TEN but that will be completely dependent on your skill level, how persistent you are, and the difficulty that you select. I played on easy and it took me almost three hours to reach the ending. I'm curious to go back and try increasing the difficulty to see how much harder it gets! ■



TEN - Ten Rooms, Ten Seconds is a precision platforming title that is very challenging! Surviving for 10 seconds in a room may sound easy, but man it feels like forever when bullets and saw blades are flying at you!

Monster Hunter Rise: Sunbreak

By Dylan Pamintuan



Publisher: Capcom
Developer: Capcom
Genre: Action
Release Date: Out Now
Platform: PC, Switch



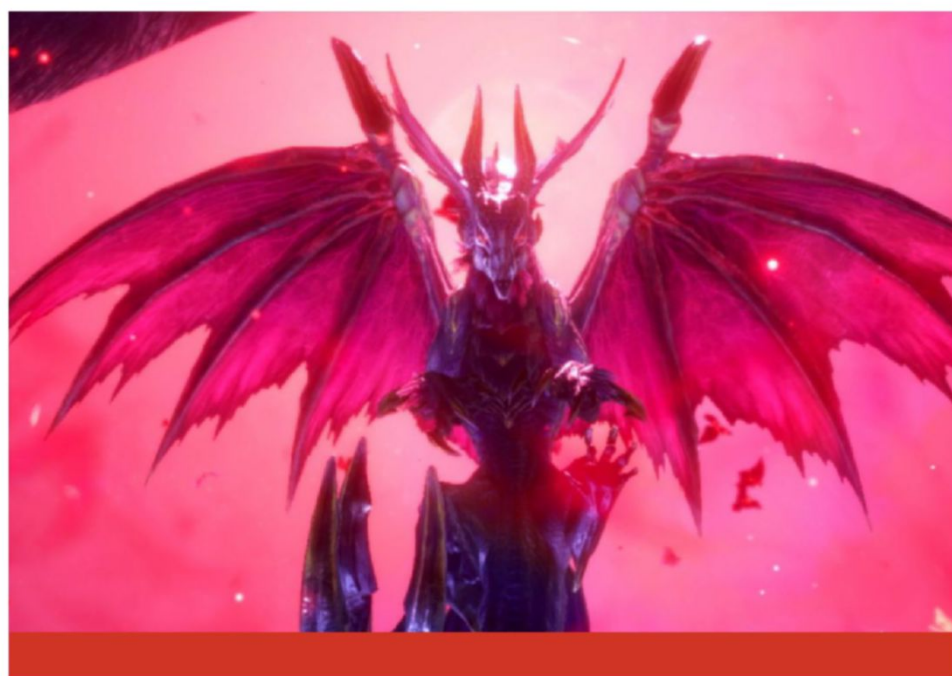
Monster Hunter Rise was first released on 26th of March 2021 on the Nintendo Switch. Taking what was learned from Monster Hunter World and its expansion Iceborne, the gameplay was improved and expanded upon to make hunts a lot more fun. Our review (which you can find in issue 141) was generally positive, with the biggest problem at the time of release being its lacklustre endgame. It slowly improved with many updates, but as someone who clocked in over 200 hours of playtime it didn't exactly keep me playing for more than a quest or two whenever an update came out. The new monsters were cool and the Event Quests had some good layered armour, but it still just came down to grinding out talismans. There were also a few complaints about the under-utilised Switch Skills and it's generally regarded that the difficulty was lowered for this entry.

However, the new DLC expansion, Sunbreak, resolves to correct that by introducing a whole bunch of stuff. New monsters, new areas, new equipment, new Silkbind moves, new quality-of-life

features, and a new difficulty to conquer: Master Rank (MR).

Can Sunbreak improve where the base game was lacking?

A new threat is endangering Kamura Village: an invasion of monsters from a kingdom far away. They'll need the best of the best hunters in the village, so Elder Fugen chose the Fierce Flame of Kamura (that's you) to be sent to Elgado Outpost to help stop it and prevent Kamura Village from



turning into a crater in the ground, like what happened to several other civilisations every 50 years or so. The story is nothing special; it's your standard Monster Hunter plot that you could probably predict if you've played any of the games before. The main draw of Monster Hunter is the monsters themselves, anyway. The characters are nice and quirky though.

First, I wanna take note of the new areas and monsters this expansion has—they are extremely well done. The Jungle, a returning area originating from Monster Hunter 2, has been updated with better textures and new areas that will surely make veteran fans excited to explore without loading screens. The Citadel is my favourite: not only does it have ruins of an old civilisation, but it also has several biomes in it so the monster variety is great.

From swamps and forests, to mountains and snow. The new monsters are no slouch in the graphics department either; Astelos, Daimyo Hermitaur, and Garangolm are sights to behold, and Seregios and Gore Magala in particular are amazing to see. The last time I saw them was on my 3DS, pixelated to all hell; fighting them now in HD at 60 FPS is both amazing and terrifying.

Speaking of fighting, one of the main changes to gameplay is Switch Skill Swap, which gives you the ability to switch between fighting styles on the fly that you can customise in the hub or camp. For example, Great Sword users can swap out their standard Charged Slash for Surge Slash; a fast, multi-hit attack perfect for inflicting status effects. There's also Swap Evade, where you can dodge after switching styles. It definitely takes some



getting used to, but I found the system pretty fun, and being able to adapt to the situation was rewarding. This type of customisation hasn't been seen since Generations Ultimate and it is a welcome addition that I hope stays for future instalments.

Follower Quests are a very interesting addition introduced in Sunbreak. These special single-player quests allow an NPC ally to join your hunts with their own armour skills, weapons, and buddy. Fiorayne might even join you on some Urgent Quests, so you could have up to five hunters in one quest. While they can faint, they don't count towards failing the quest and can be revived on the spot. However, this isn't very common as Followers can take care of themselves with no need to babysit them. They know when to dodge, run, heal

themselves, heal you, lay traps, throw flash bombs — everything a normal player can and would do. For example, during a standard hunting quest, Fiorayne suddenly ran off in the middle of a fight, then came back Wyvern Riding another monster and toppled the target down. They will even sleep bomb monsters when they have the chance. The only real issue I had with them was that they occasionally target the wrong monster and will run off after it, but if you keep fighting the real target, they'll head back to keep kicking arse.

There are some really cool quality of life features and fun stuff to play around with once you unlock them. For example, if you have a Palamute with you, you get an expanded inventory and the ability to mark points of interest (like gathering points and endemic life) on the map, while Palicos can learn





Secret Support Moves that massively help out in the middle of a fight. Plus, with the exclusion of Rampage Quests and Ramp-Up skills being replaced by Rampage Decorations, you don't have to grind out Rampages anymore. All of these changes generally smooth out all the problems Rise's base endgame had. Plus, Elgado Outpost is a slightly better hub than Kamura Village. You don't need to wait through a loading screen if you want to maintain your Argosy or craft new equipment. All the important facilities are all in one area, and are just a wiredash or two away from each other.

There were also tons of small details I noticed while I was playing. From what I found there are two Cohoot nests hidden up high in Elgado where you can get free items and feed a baby Cohoot between hunts and, as you go through the story, the title

screen changes to reflect whatever developments there are in it. It's cool stuff that I can appreciate.

Now, onto the expansion's difficulty. As I mentioned before, Monster Hunter Rise wasn't exactly the hardest Monster Hunter entry to date. The only real difficulty spikes came from Apex monsters and Crimson Glow Valstrax. However, the addition of Master Rank should resolve that, right?

Well... it tries. At least for me.

All the monsters in MR will have new moves and can very easily two-shot or one-shot you if you aren't careful or underprepared. However, I didn't really run into much trouble until MR5 which is pretty far into the expansion. Even Espinas and its fire/poison/paralysis attacks didn't worry me as

much as I thought. It was pretty much smooth sailing until Malzeno, which actually put me at risk of failing for the first time in 80 quests. From there the game actually stops holding back, having monsters seriously punish you for mistakes like overusing wirefalls. Still, the game still heavily favours the player. It's not the hunters that should be scared, it's the monsters. While I don't mind (I still remember pulling my hair out over Gogmazios and Dalamadur after dozens of failed attempts), I felt like I was going through High Rank all over again except with the occasional new monster. However, this is just from my personal experience and skill level. I'm usually over-prepared and have poured many hours into Monster Hunter, so what I think is easy might be a wall to others.

Now, I was playing a beta version of Sunbreak for this review, so what I say should be taken with a grain of salt, but I did encounter some bugs and

performance issues. There was one time a Blood Orange Bishaten was floating right above the ground for a minute, and I sometimes suffered some slowdown after unpausing my game, frame drops, and even suffered a crash but it was never anything game-breaking or too annoying. What was annoying was when I had to wait for NPCs I've interacted with to finish their goodbye animation before I could do anything else like save or talk to someone else. I also noticed that there were two Dango Skills with very similar names: Dango Defender and Dango Defender (Hi/Lo). This has probably been all ironed out in the full release but I just wanted to take note of it.

I love Monster Hunter and I liked Monster Hunter Rise, but it came out in a polished yet unfinished state. The endgame and completion of the story had to be patched in at later dates, and I admit that I got bored of endlessly generating new talismans





and moved onto other games. Monster Hunter Rise: Sunbreak pulled me back in. Every day, I would be itching to play more and get better gear for my next hunt against any world-ending threat that was being thrown my way... and then groan when it doesn't drop the one material I need to craft the armour set I wishlisted. I just wished it gave me more of a challenge sooner rather than later.

To summarise this entire review into a sentence: It's more Monster Hunter, and that is never a bad thing to me.

Monster Hunter Rise: Sunbreak is available on Nintendo Switch and Steam. You will need the base game, and must complete the 7-star Hub Quest "Serpent Goddess of Thunder" to access it! ■



Monster Hunter Rise: Sunbreak is a great expansion to an already good game. You'll appreciate all the changes and new features added, but it won't give you a challenge until much later.

Cuphead: The Delicious Last Course

By Alana Dunitz



Publisher: Studio MDHR Entertainment Inc.
Developer: Studio MDHR Entertainment Inc.
Genre: Platform
Release Date: Out Now
Platform: PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch



I was excited to try this DLC and try it all out for myself to see if it lives up to the hype around it and if it was worth the wait. As soon as you start the game, you will notice that there is a new theme song to go along with the new title screen that shows Cuphead, Mugman, and Ms. Chalice together. The song is once again incredibly catchy and feels just like an old barbershop tune.

The setting for the DLC is Isle IV, a set of four isles that are part of the larger Inkwell Island from the main game. To get to this new destination, you have to jump into a rowboat to get taken over. This new island is beautiful with its watercolour look, little village to explore, mountains, and a forest; it fits seamlessly with the worlds from the base game. Once you get into the levels, you are treated to bosses with crazy personas and the same classic animation style that we know and love. The new levels that you find in the Delicious Last Course DLC aren't just boss battles: there is a variety ranging from run and gun levels, stages where you have to parry to defeat all the pink-coloured enemies, ones

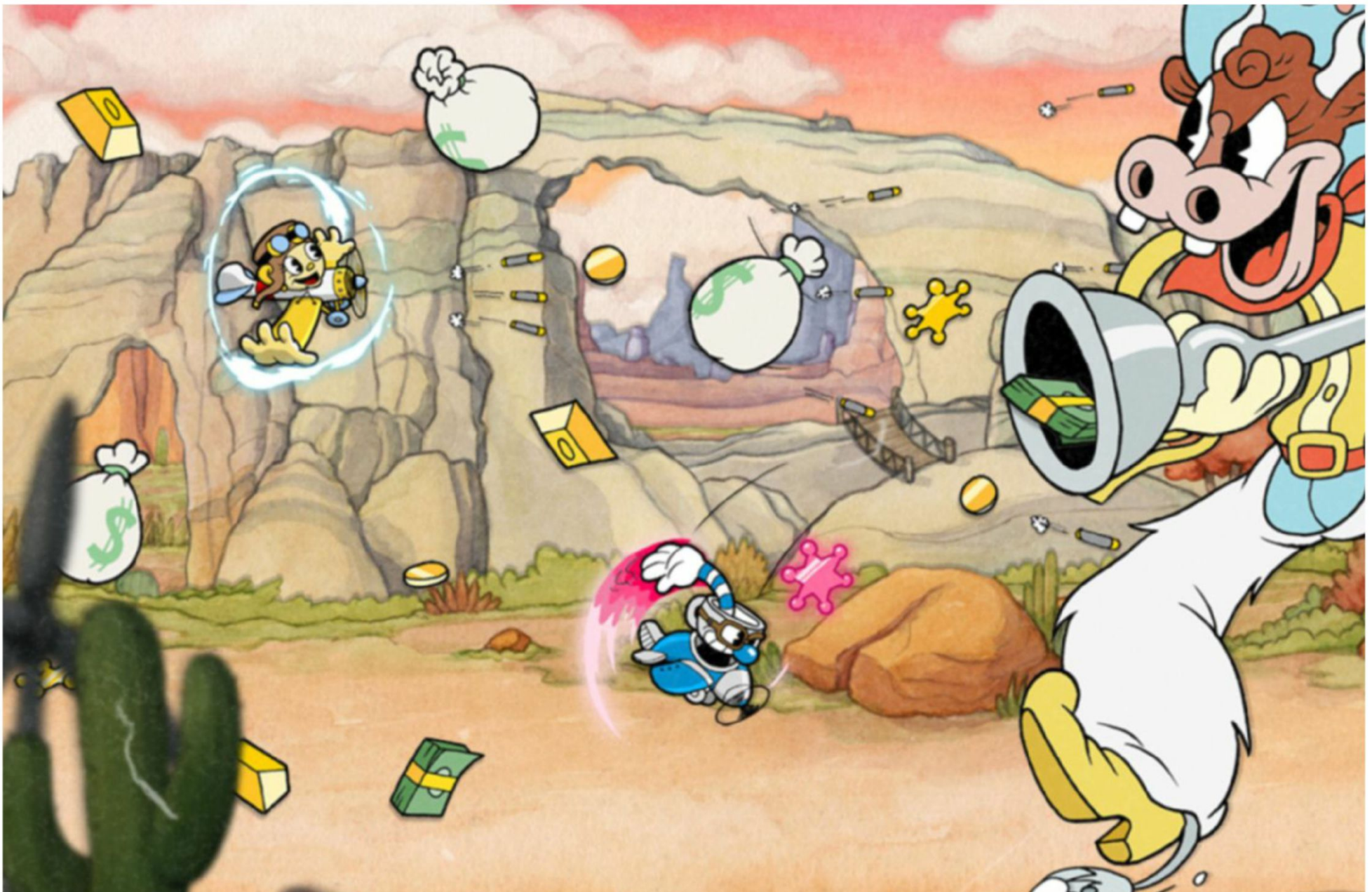
where you hop into a plane and take to the skies to defeat a boss, and others where you are in the sky but you are on a floating platform instead of a fighter plane. The vast variety helps the DLC feel fresh and not stale as it would if you were always playing the exact same type of levels. At any point in time, if you want to rechallenge any of the levels from the base game, all you need to do is hop in the boat and select which of the isles you want to travel to.



As you explore the island, you will see that Porkrinds Emporium is back once again to sell you power-ups and weapons for your characters — though some are definitely more useful than others, so choose wisely! Chef Saltbaker is a new character that we have not seen before; this chipper and jolly chef is the one responsible for creating the cookies that allow Ms. Chalice to switch places from the astral plane with either Cuphead or Mugman. Be sure to visit him frequently, as he will give you power-ups to aid you along the way. Chef Saltbaker has also come up with a recipe for a baked good called a Wondertart; this tart will allow for control over the astral plane so you can bring Ms. Chalice back to life permanently — no more swapping places between the characters. The thing is you will have to find all the ingredients he needs to bake up this tart, so that will require you to

battle the bosses who are guarding them around the map. The catch is that you will have to defeat the enemy on Regular mode, and if you are playing on the easier Simple difficulty, you won't get the required ingredients.

In the past, when you would play cooperatively with another person, it would be tricky to keep track of which character you were — especially since Cuphead and Mugman look very similar except for their colours — but now when one person is Ms. Chalice it was a lot easier to keep them straight. I know at my house it was a fight over who got to play as the new character, so when I finally got to try her out once I was playing by myself, I got to see how her new moves worked and how they compared to playing as one of the two original characters.



First off, I love the ability to double jump; the extra jump really makes evading enemy attacks so much easier, especially later when you have to avoid bosses rolling at you, the extra jump really helps! The other main difference with controlling Ms. Chalice is that she has a dash parry attack that she can do along the ground; you don't need to jump as you do with the other two, though I did find that I was trying to parry the old way that I was used to, so it may take a bit of practice to get used to this. When she fires, she shoots three shots at a time, which is really useful when you have a bunch of smaller enemies coming at you, allowing you to hit the boss multiple times causing more damage. After I got some coins and was finally able to buy items from Porkrind's Emporium, I found that one of my favourites is the Chaser. It's a long-range weapon that does below-average damage, but you

don't have to aim as all the shots will automatically hit the enemies; this weapon lets you focus on avoiding the incoming attacks and the smaller enemies coming at you. Even with awesome weapons like these, Cuphead is still an incredibly challenging game! For people who find it quite difficult, it would be nice to be able to get the ingredients for the tart on the easier mode, as I feel if players have to play the harder difficulty and do not do well, they will get discouraged and give up.

Everything I loved about the original game is here, and being able to play as Ms. Chalice along with Cuphead and Mugman is great. The classic look and music are so charming it's hard not to love the feel of this game instantly, especially if you love things like the old Mickey Mouse or Felix the Cat cartoons. The wait for The Delicious Last Course





was a long one but it was definitely worth it; the fact that it seamlessly combines with the base game and allows you to play the original levels with a new character was a welcome surprise. Using the abilities of Ms. Chalice definitely helped me defeat bosses that I had previously found difficult in the original game. The only thing I would want to change is being able to complete the elements of the story quest in Simple Mode and not be required to beat everything on Regular. For some

people — and younger players — Regular mode is a bit too frustrating or challenging to get through. Cuphead in The Delicious Last Course is something I feel Cuphead lovers definitely have to check out. It is so fun and a treat for the eyes with those beautiful visuals and a great soundtrack; it has to be experienced. Just don't forget to equip the Astral Cookie in the charm menu if you want to switch to Ms. Chalice! ■



Cuphead in The Delicious Last Course is a must-play for people who enjoyed the original game. If you found Cuphead too challenging, then chances are you will still find it pretty hard even with the inclusion of Ms. Chalice and her special abilities.

AI: THE SOMNIUM FILES - nirvanA Initiative

By Charr Davenport



Publisher: Spike Chunsoft Co., Ltd.
Developer: Spike Chunsoft Co., Ltd.
Genre: Adventure
Release Date: Out Now
Platform: PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch



Worldwide conspiracies, secret cult-like organisations, AI girls that live in eye sockets, Pokémon rip-offs, and the power of dreams: Spike Chunsoft's AI: THE SOMNIUM FILES - nirvanA Initiative truly has it all. Oh, it also has serial killings.

A sequel that stands on its own, AI: THE SOMNIUM FILES - nirvanA Initiative is a point-and-click adventure game with fascinating puzzle elements and a storyline that backs it all up. The title (and truthfully, the full AI: THE SOMNIUM FILES series, as its predecessor is also deserving of praise) fits in well with classic and modern point-and-click murder mystery games, such as the Ace Attorney series or Spike Chunsoft's other series of the exact same genre, Danganronpa. Having said that, the title stands apart from other point-and-clicks, aside from its own predecessor, for one very important reason: the third-person perspective bits known as Somnium.

Somnium — stick with me now — is the place where dreams collide... by which I mean Somnium is the place where the police take suspects and the like and interrogate them by knocking them out — I am not joking — and straight-up invading their minds to search for subconscious clues and

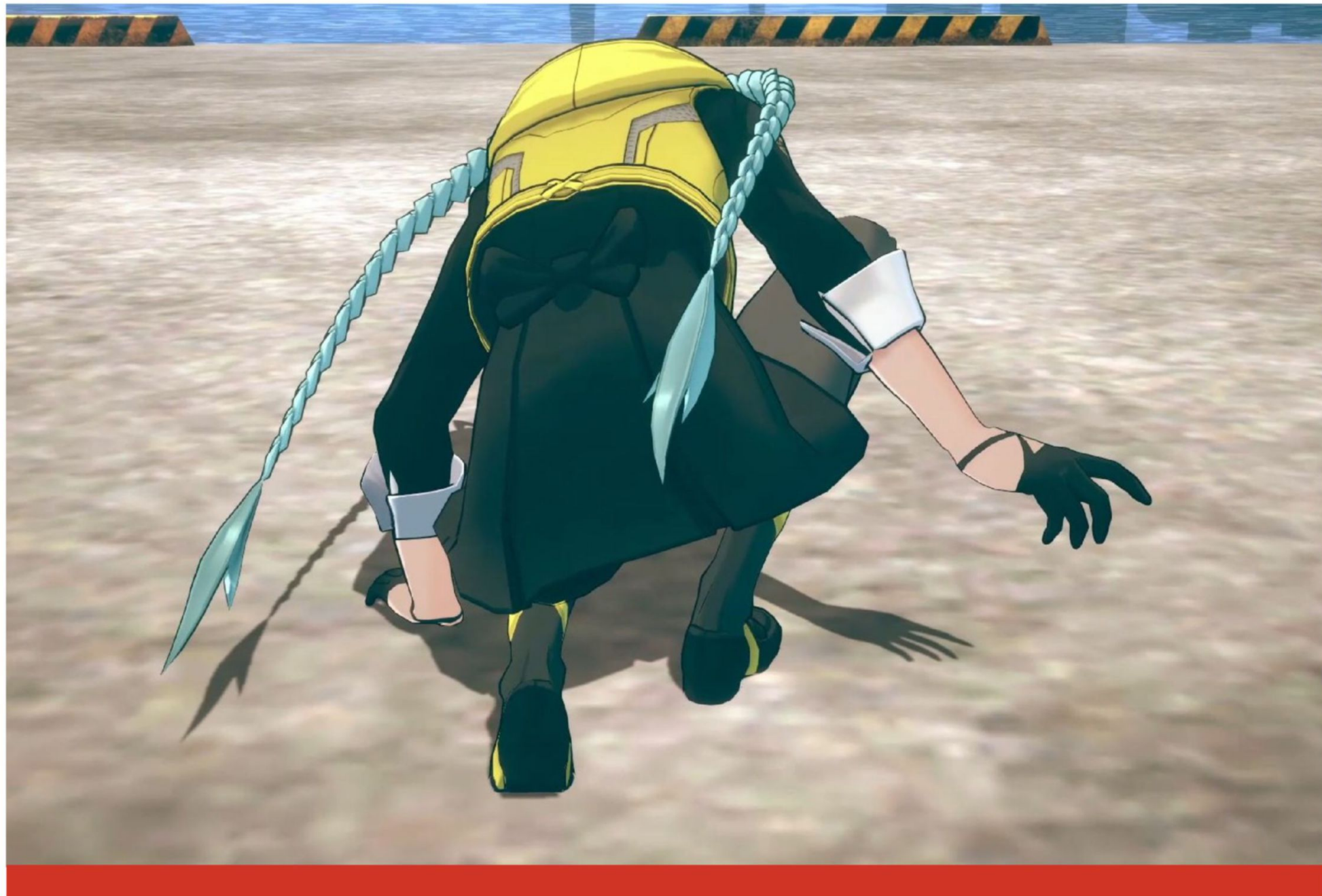




evidence. It's a little messed up, to say the least, but forget about that now because YOU are the police, yeah! Basic human rights are fun to violate when it's you doing the violating!

Of course, I'm joking (to an extent). Somnium, despite all the flaws in the fictional police system you find yourself a part of, is where the meat of the game happens. While there is a lot of exploration done and time spent during the first-person point-and-click portions, it all truly comes together in the dream worlds of the characters that the player will get to know and possibly care for. Each dream is moulded perfectly to the character it belongs to while still weaving seamlessly into the plot. And that's not even touching on mechanics yet!

Somnium provides both an interesting experience and a refreshing take on decision-based gameplay. Depending on whether the player is on the Ryuki or Mizuki side of the story — I promise we'll come back to this later — these portions of the game will be manned by either Tama or Aiba, two artificially intelligent beings that resemble women and live in the main characters' eye sockets. It's explained that people with these funky AI eyes (known as AI-balls) had their actual eyes removed, and honestly, it's a little horrific to think about. Eye mutilation aside, these portions find Aiba or Tama, depending on your route, exploring the dreamscape and interacting with various items to progress the story and find valuable information. When interacting with an item, the player is forced to make a choice regarding it, usually nonsensical in nature since you are in a dream state. The player only receives "six »



minutes” (which can be stretched into over twenty easily if you’re insane, like me) to stay inside of Somnium, with each decision and interaction costing the player literal time. This portion of the game really kept me on my toes, as it was very suspenseful fighting the clock to solve the mysteries within the dreams while also trying out every single option just to see what happens out of curiosity. It’s also worth mentioning that when a Somnium is complete, the player can revisit it in a timeless mode known as Unlimited Psync.

Moving beyond dreams, the rest of the game is in first-person except for some cutscenes and the occasional quick-time events that are planted within them. Really, if the game has switched to a third-person perspective outside of Somnium, be prepared for things to get intense. As QTEs are

often life-threatening experiences, missing them will cause your character to die and you will be prompted to retry the scene while your eyeball counterpart dramatically calls your name in the background. It really is a terrible day for rain~

The two protagonists in the game — and the points where the story splits in half — are Metro Police ABIS agents Kuruto Ryuki and Mizuki Date (the latter of whom was a main character in the previous title, *AI: THE SOMNIUM FILES*, then named Mizuki Okiura). The game follows Ryuki as he tries and fails to solve the strange Half Body serial murder case and slowly loses his mental health. On the other end is Mizuki, who has taken up the HB Case six years later with a need to solve the serial murders and possibly find the truth behind her now-missing guardian, Kaname Date, the

protagonist of the first title. Both characters are truly unique in their thoughts, story, and dialogue, while the gameplay remains extremely similar. With that said, I preferred the Ryuki portions due to his personality, depth, and relationships with other characters.

Speaking of relationships, the biggest difference between the two protagonists is their relationship with their respective AIs, Tama being Ryuki's and Aiba being Mizuki's after formerly being Date's. Tama and Ryuki's relationship is honestly one of the best pairings I've seen in any videogame. They constantly banter in a lighthearted manner, often joke about romantic and sexual connotations and implications (talk about that "emotional chocolate"), and truly show care for one another multiple times. Their overly-intense-for-a-work-relationship

relationship also parallels nicely with the first game's pairing of Date and Aiba, with Tama being an overly sexual BDSM-themed jokester and Ryuki being rather dorky at times, similar to the horny Date and the nerdy Aiba. Unfortunately, Mizuki and Aiba's relationship is a bit lacking compared to that of Tama and Ryuki's, as well as her predecessor's relationship with Aiba. This is explained by the circumstance, however. Kaname Date is missing and may possibly be deceased; meanwhile, his AI-ball quite literally rests in his adopted daughter's face. Their relationship may be a bit clunky because of the emotional situation both characters have been put in, but Aiba and Mizuki still manage to connect and show care for each other.

This was originally the part where I finally dive into the story of AI: THE SOMNIUM FILES- nirvanA





Initiative, but before I can do that, I gotta talk about the puzzles and the point-and-click elements. One of the more fascinating features of the game is that there are two point-and-click gameplay areas: casual life and crime scenes. While the player is out and about, interrogating suspects or just eating at a diner, they can click on nearly every object in a room and see witty thoughts or occasional dialogue and banter. Crime scenes, on the other hand, still have point-and-click action but now with puzzles involved. The player, with the help of their AI, must piece together the truth through puzzles that vary drastically in each area, some much easier than others. Not all puzzles are created equal. This is where my first big grief with the game happened.

There is a puzzle that I am not going to fully talk about because of spoilers, but let me tell you, I am

PISSED over it. It is fully a maths problem with no hints, skips, or ways to back out of it, so I was STUCK FOR HOURS. I quite literally had to reach out to friends and my sister, the latter of whom is a mechanical engineering student, only for none of them to understand it at all. So I had to then message a higher-up at GameOn — thank you, Andrew — who then had to message the developer and publisher of the game, Spike Chunsoft.

Luckily, Spike Chunsoft's people are rather speedy with replies and I got to very quickly discover that I was an idiot all along who couldn't figure out to multiply downwards despite doing literally everything else. I'm mad about it and I'll stay mad about it despite it 100% being the fault of my stupidity. Why? Because, as I said earlier, there were no prompts, no hints, no ways out, and to put

the cherry on top, Tama yelled at me multiple times for getting it wrong but helped me in literally no way before eventually giving up on yelling completely. She was just really rude and I was stuck. The answer is really obvious once you know it, by the way, but that really makes it all worse.

But enough of that negativity! On to the story!

I don't want to go into spoiler territory on this, so I'll make it quick. AI: THE SOMNIUM FILES- nirvanA Initiative is an extremely interesting murder mystery with many endings, some of which I wasn't even remotely prepared for (I will be seeing you at Atami, my lovely receptionist). I was constantly trying to predict the next event in the plot and always found myself pleasantly wrong, as the game is more creative than my mind; be glad I didn't

write it. I also found the characters to be incredibly well-written and endearing, each giving the story more depth simply by existing. Beyond that, the game does an amazing job of mixing dark, gritty topics with lighthearted humour and slice-of-life side plots, as well as using these things to misdirect the player. The story also makes use of Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) in a way that ties together the in-game world and the real world. Pretty funky, if you ask me.

Other places AI: THE SOMNIUM FILES- nirvanA Initiative excels in are aesthetic and sound design. The story involves talk of glitches often and the art uses this to its total advantage. The game is filled with disturbing, glitch-like moments, during which the art design truly shines. Even when the world isn't tearing at the seams, however, each area and



character stands out due to the personality they are given simply through the art alone; small touches in decor and clothing truly make each room and character pop. Along with that, the game's adaptive soundtrack works perfectly with almost every environment the player will find themselves in. However, music is where I find my second and only other big gripe...

Every once in a while, an event will happen that will trigger a character of the teen girl variety to break out into song and dance — Once again, I am not joking. Unfortunately, and I don't mean to be rude about this but it has gotta be said, the singing is really not good. I'm not saying that it is bad, but it is very much not good. I'm a bit snooty when it comes to music specifically, as I did go to college for music at one point in my life. I acknowledge that I am

possibly being a bitch here. But oh my God, I could have walked into any college with an applied music program and have found better singers for these incredibly cringe-y song numbers that last anywhere from half a minute to three minutes — entirely too long for any game, even with a good singer. It's the worst part of *AI: THE SOMNIUM FILES- nirvanA Initiative* for me and I wish it wasn't happening each time it happens. It's also worth mentioning that the lyrics for these songs are really awful. I can't help but wonder if they come across better in the original Japanese version of the game because they don't work well in English at all.

With that, however, I hold no other things against this title. In fact, I found it to be one of the most fun gameplay experiences I've had in a long time. I couldn't put it down at times because of how





interested I was and I ended up putting 32 hours into it within three days. That's really intense for me. AI: THE SOMNIUM FILES- nirvanA Initiative — it really never stops being a mouthful — has multiple endings, branching paths, choices, and interaction options that I have yet to discover at the time of writing, but plan to reach soon as I continue to 100% complete it, as it is a game worth finishing fully.

Overall, AI: THE SOMNIUM FILES- nirvanA Initiative is great as both a sequel and a stand-alone title, catering to both returning fans of the series and brand new fans, who can even choose to avoid spoilers regarding the first game. I can truthfully say that this game deserves a place in the libraries of anyone who loves point-and-click games, murder mysteries, futuristic aesthetics, ARGs, and V-Tubers, as well as anyone who is looking for an in-depth story experience. ■



AI: THE SOMNIUM FILES- nirvanA Initiative is an amazing point-and-click adventure and an even better murder mystery. I truly believe that it belongs on the shelves of most gamers, but I really am mad about that one puzzle. Also, 9 is a really funny score if you've played the game.

Sonic Origins

By Alana Dunitz



Publisher: Sega

Developer: Sega

Genre: Platform

Release Date: Out Now

Platform: PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox X|S, Switch

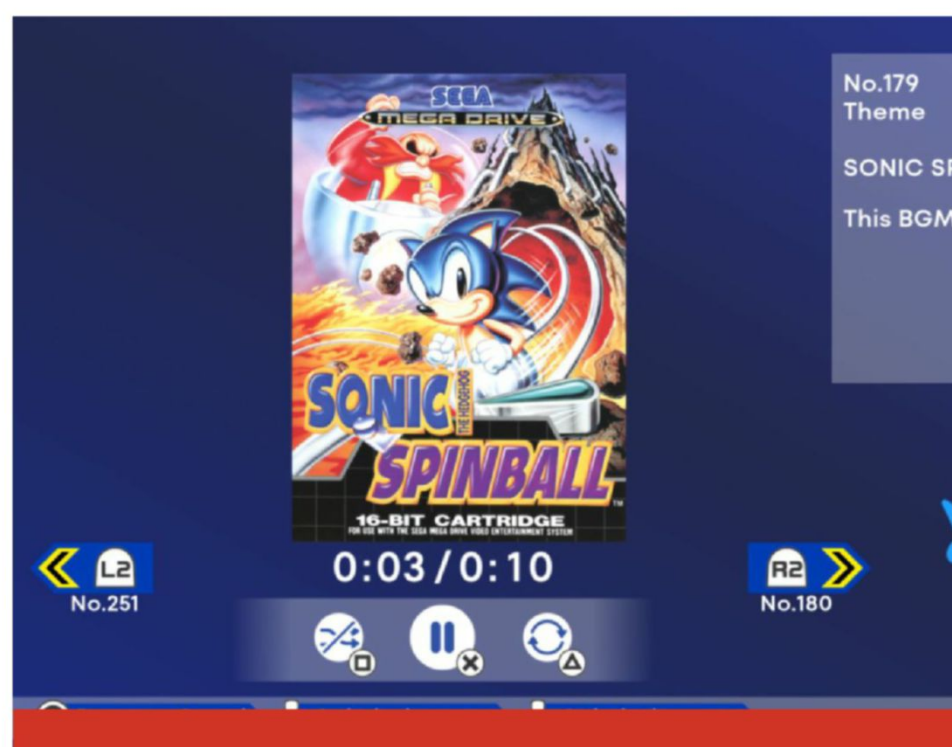


Sonic is back, and this time with his friends Tails and Knuckles to take on four classic games that originally were released on the Sega Mega Drive — also known as the Sega Genesis — and the Mega-CD — also known as the Sega CD. This time around, players can select any of the three characters to play as for any of the titles in this collection; Sonic the Hedgehog, Sonic the Hedgehog 2, Sonic CD, and Sonic the Hedgehog 3 & Knuckles. All the titles have the classic 4:3 aspect ratio like they did when they were released years ago, but no CRT filter to give it that old-school look; but there is also a new Anniversary mode that has a 16:9 ratio to fit better on modern screens. This change is a welcome addition as it not only looks nice — no big black bars — but you can see further ahead and behind your character. Once you play it like this, it would be hard to return to the original 4:3.

Each game in the collection can be played in either Anniversary or Classic mode. Anniversary mode isn't just the support for a 16:9 display; it also gives the player infinite lives so you won't be getting game overs and having to start back at the

beginning. Still, even with this addition, this collection is very challenging, especially if you are a newbie to the series. There is no rewinding time or save states so you will be stuck relying on checkpoints like in the original games.

It seems odd that Sonic Origins neglected to include some of the other classic Sonic titles like Sonic Spinball, Sonic 3D Blast, or Knuckles Chaotix — especially since this collection was released to commemorate the 31st anniversary of the Sonic franchise. There is a museum here with artwork and music, but to view most of the items, you must



collect coins while playing the games. The images gallery has some neat additions, like viewing the manuals for each of the four titles and flipping through the pages. The music gallery lets you listen to some of the music from the original games — not the tracks that Michael Jackson reportedly worked on for Sonic 3 though, as they have been replaced. If you are looking for the remastered tracks you will have to purchase the Classic Music Pack DLC for £3.29 or \$5 US. That's not the only DLC that Sonic Origins has; for another £3.29, you can purchase the Premium Fun Pack. This includes letterbox backgrounds, new character animations, and harder challenge missions.

Sonic Origins looks really nice as it was recreated from the ground up to look like the originals, not just emulated like some other game collections. It

was nice having the choice of character to use in each title, though you can't switch to someone else whenever you want in a playthrough. You are stuck playing as that character until you start another save file. It would have been cool if you could switch at the beginning of every stage because Sonic's speed is very beneficial for some stages, and others would benefit by using Knuckles and his swimming ability. These games are quite hard, especially for someone who is used to having their progress automatically saved so they don't have to do a lot of backtracking. It definitely helps that you have unlimited lives in Anniversary mode but I found some of the sections quite tricky and I was stuck going back to the last checkpoint every time. It would be nice to have a setting in the options to lower the difficulty by having it that when you get hit you don't lose all of your rings, or at least when





you start back at that point you have all the rings you had when you originally got there. It's tricky to make progress when you don't even have one ring!

Sonic Origins includes a Mission Mode that has two options: Story Mode lets you play through the games as one continuous story experience, or you can complete challenges in Mission Mode — why it's called the same thing I'm not sure, Challenge Mode might have made more sense — that will reward you coins depending on your rank determined by how fast you complete them. These missions take place in stages that you know from the games, like Scrap Brain Zone Act 2, and you will try to defeat five Caterkillars and reach the goal as fast as you can. Each of the four titles has 15 different challenges that will keep you busy for a while and will let you unlock new items in the

Museum, and coins are also used to retry the bonus stages where you get Chaos Emeralds. If you want to see the actual ending of the collection you have to get those Emeralds or else all you see is a screen asking you to “Try Again” so you will definitely want to keep those coins!

If you decide that you want to check out Sonic Origins with a friend, you can play all the games from the collection co-op with a friend except for the first Sonic the Hedgehog. A word of warning; chances are poor Tails will be getting dragged behind on the screen because the screen stays centred on Sonic. There are also more mini-games, like having you race to find out who can finish five laps the fastest, or try out the Blue Sphere Bonus Game Grand Prix Race.



Sonic Origins is a fun collection, especially since all the titles individually have been delisted on Steam, which is really a shame because of all the great stuff created with Steam Workshop by players; check this article out to learn more. It feels like they could have done more with this collection, or at least had an option for difficulty or the addition of save points so you didn't always need to return to the last checkpoint. The animations are cool and playing in 16:9 was great, it was nice to be able to

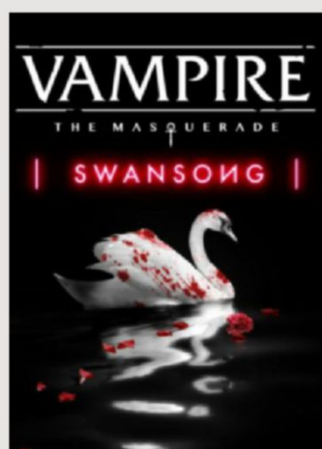
see further in front of you so you knew what obstacles lay ahead. If you are looking for an old-school level of challenge, and want to play the classic games updated to look great on your TV, Sonic Origins fits the bill, but boo for the additional DLC for stuff that should have been included or available to unlock by playing, not paying. Though I did love being able to play as any of the three characters in games that they weren't even in before! ■



Sonic Origins looks and sounds great, but doesn't add extra perks like the ability to rewind or save states that would help lower the difficulty. The ability to play as Sonic, Tails, or Knuckles in each of the games is a nice touch.

Vampire: The Masquerade - Swansong

By Erin McAllister



Publisher: Bigben

Developer: Cyanide

Genre: Adventure

Release Date: Out Now

Platform: PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox X|S, Switch



This hasn't come up very often in my time with GameOn, but I am an avid player of tabletop RPGs like Dungeons & Dragons, Pathfinder, or even homebrewed campaigns cut out of whole cloth. There are many reasons to enjoy these types of games, such as getting into the nitty-gritty of their combat systems, building powerful characters, or crafting a world together with a group of friends and spending time with them in that world. While I certainly enjoy all of these elements, the main aspect of tabletop RPGs that I get excited by is the roleplaying and character work. Now, because I can't just ask my friends to drop everything to play these games with me all the time, I'm always on the lookout for videogames that can scratch this particular itch. However, even some of my favourite roleplaying titles, like Mass Effect, lean more into combat than what I'm looking for. A lot of the Telltale-style games come pretty close, but there's not usually the same sense of building a character in those titles.

One game that really scratched that itch for me was The Council, from developer Big Bad Wolf Studio. While it wasn't perfect by any means, it was almost exactly the sort of thing I was looking for, with various stats and skills that could open up a variety of options in exploration and dialogue. The plot and characters were interesting, though it suffered at times from its episodic structure necessitating less divergences from the plot as time went on. So when I heard that Big Bad Wolf had another title in the making, I knew I had to try it, particularly seeing as I was already a burgeoning fan of the franchise it would be set in.

Enter Vampire: The Masquerade - Swansong. Set in White Wolf Publishing's World of Darkness franchise and specifically in Vampire: The Masquerade — their flagship series of tabletop RPGs — Swansong was developed by Big Bad Wolf Studio and published by Nacon. The story follows a sect of vampires — specifically referred to as a Camarilla in this context — living in Boston, Massachusetts in the continental United States of



America. There are a lot of relevant terms and events that I would like to bring up to properly introduce a lot of the game — after all, this is a lore-heavy franchise that’s been going strong for decades and I am a stickler for details — but the gist is that these vampires are hiding themselves from human society to protect themselves and their way of (un)life. *Swansong* opens after an attack that has left many important figures in the vampire community missing or dead. It’s up to the three playable characters — Emem Louis, the owner of several clubs in the area; Galeb Bazory, the very old protector/executioner of the Boston Camarilla; and Leysha, a woman prone to visions of the future who also cares for her young daughter — to discover how the attack occurred, reveal who was behind it, stop them from doing anything like it again, and protect the vampires of Boston.

Thankfully, while I was already aware of many of the specific details that make up the world of *Vampire: The Masquerade*, *Swansong* offers a very useful Codex that provides necessary and supplementary information for its story. This is

hardly new for RPGs that have a narrative focus or complex worldbuilding, but *Swansong* has a neat little feature that I greatly appreciated. Whenever a concept is brought up in the plot without any built-in explanation or context, *Swansong* will offer a prompt to “learn more” about said concept, taking the player directly to the appropriate entry. This is very nice, particularly seeing how none of the protagonists are themselves new to the setting. They don’t need an explanation for most details and the game doesn’t treat them or the player like they’re new to the whole ‘vampire’ thing. It’s there if a player needs it, but it’s never obtrusive.

The game itself is broken up into various scenes — levels where one of the three characters is able to explore a given area and work towards completing their main objective. These scenes involve a variety of urban settings, with most taking place in large homes or facilities. There are other locations, including a wide docking bay that features an interconnected sewer system alongside several smaller buildings, but even those more similar locales do an impressive job of feeling unique





and lived in. In one scene, a presumed-dead man's apartment reveals how the occupant's life has unravelled through a variety of strong environmental details, like how the entire area is just covered in beer and boxes of half-eaten pizza.

One of Swansong's best self-contained scenes takes place rather early in the game and really takes advantage of the more fantastical aspects of the setting. After Emem is tasked with ensuring that a deal with a rivalling faction is still viable after the attack, she finds herself lost in a magical prison that has stolen her memories. The area is large and complex, winding back in on itself here and there, and acts as a beautifully terrifying liminal space for Emem to try and rediscover herself. For one thing, the disjointed and jagged environment is a great tutorial for Emem's ability to leap across chasms. Another great part of the scene is the fact that she can actually fail the secondary objective of recovering all of her memories while still allowing the plot to move forward. This offers the player the opportunity to explore how to work through painful experiences like that. Many of the scenes can end in partial failures like this that allow the story to continue while dealing with actual

ramifications, which really helps make each playthrough feel like more of a personal experience.

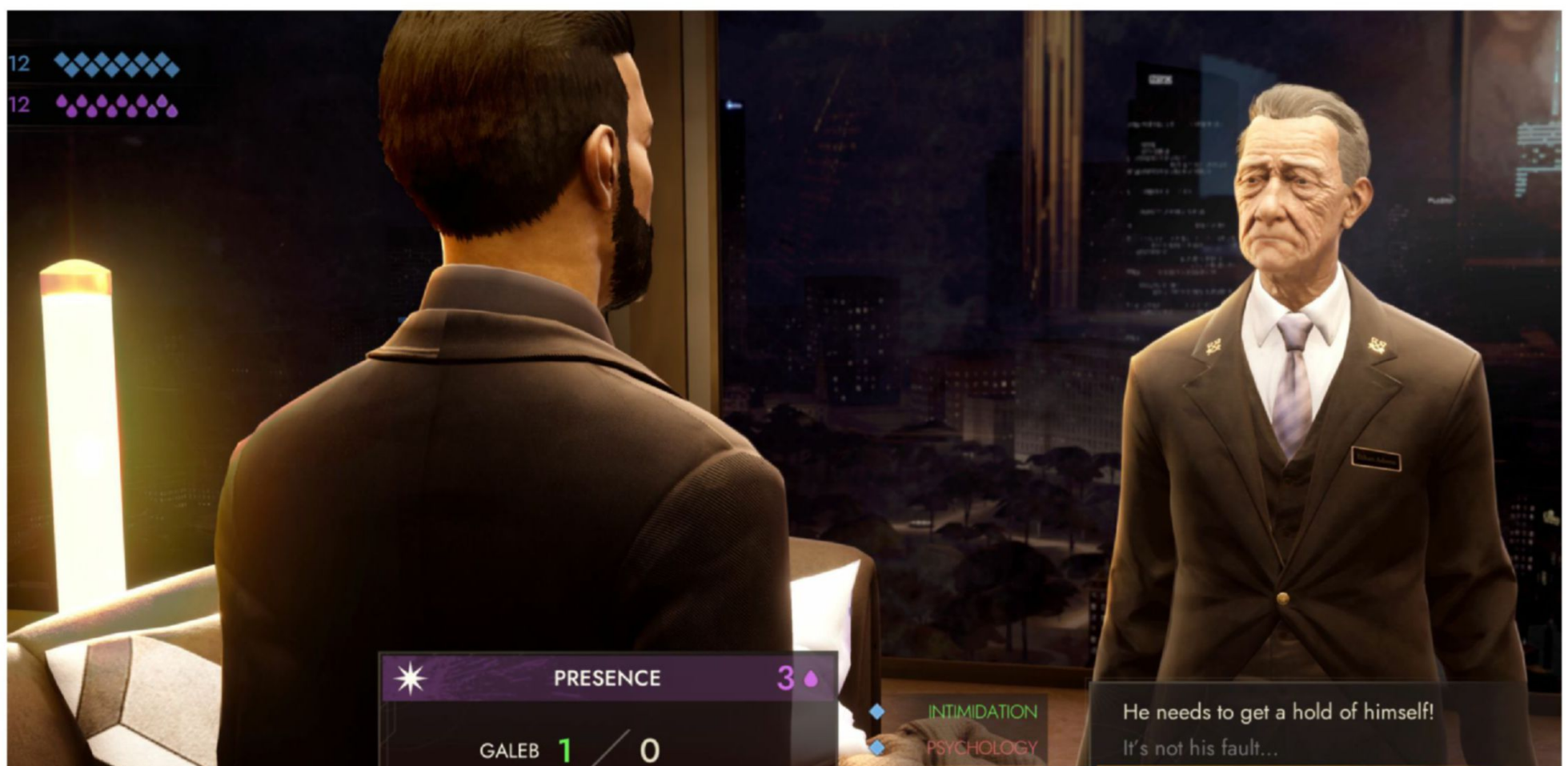
There's even a very interesting puzzle in this Emem scene that is far more complicated than I had originally assumed. It hides a second puzzle within it if she decides to stick around and keep interacting with it after solving it once. I personally brute-forced my way through this secret challenge because I forgot which symbol I was supposed to be looking for, but even then, I felt rewarded for bothering to double-check the area I was in and trying something a little weird. Of course, the actual reward for completing this extra challenge is the option to cause a major split in what the game's narrative can provide from then on, but I wouldn't want to spoil much along that particular path. Let me just say that it offers even more background details, several unique challenges that wouldn't otherwise crop up, and a special ending that can turn everything on its head. It's worth experiencing, though there's also the option to completely ignore it, even if the player wants some of those sweet, sweet experience points for solving the hidden puzzle.

Those experience points can be spent on a variety of skills and vampiric powers known as Disciplines. Every character has the same skills but different sets of Disciplines. I very much appreciated that, as it helped to make all three characters feel distinct in their playstyles, even beyond my having the ability to customise their more general skills however I wished. However, Swansong doesn't always make sure that every character build is viable. Some abilities are rarely used, and sometimes success in an unavoidable challenge requires that a character took a specific skill or Discipline up to a very high level, with absolutely no alternative. This problem is admittedly rare because many instances where one would be required to use a skill can instead be sidestepped by exploring the world in more detail and solving smaller puzzles beforehand, but when those issues do crop up, they can be rather glaring.

The most egregious of these is Galeb's Fortitude Discipline. It allows him to endure intense physical pain and discomfort and can offer the ability to raise his chance of succeeding in conversations

when someone attempts to coerce him. However, the first real moment where it can be used is halfway through the game as an alternate solution for dealing with an electrical problem. This alternate solution acts as a sort of heads-up that Fortitude is now officially in play and that players may want to invest in it, but since the player can't level up a character's abilities mid-gameplay, that's hard to do when that very scene ends in a sequence where being able to use Fortitude is the only way to succeed. To add insult to injury, Fortitude doesn't really come up again in a significant way for the remainder of the game. No other ability has this sort of laser-focus to when it can be useful, but I've still frequently felt the urge to reset many scenes in order to rebuild my characters around the challenges that they'll be facing therein.

Beyond that, the point-and-click-esque gameplay of walking around, picking up useful objects, solving puzzles, and talking to people is quite engaging. When exploring, there are often multiple paths to



completing objectives. Players can choose to follow specific scents around to guarantee that they find everything on an NPC's path or figure out where they went by questioning people and investigating their environment. They can convince someone to help them through vampiric mind powers, a healthy dose of mundane manipulation, or through arguments that are built off of objects picked up and knowledge learned prior to that conversation. I found myself taking a variety of careful notes to assist me in clearing my way through puzzle after puzzle and becoming deeply engrossed in both the game and its plot.

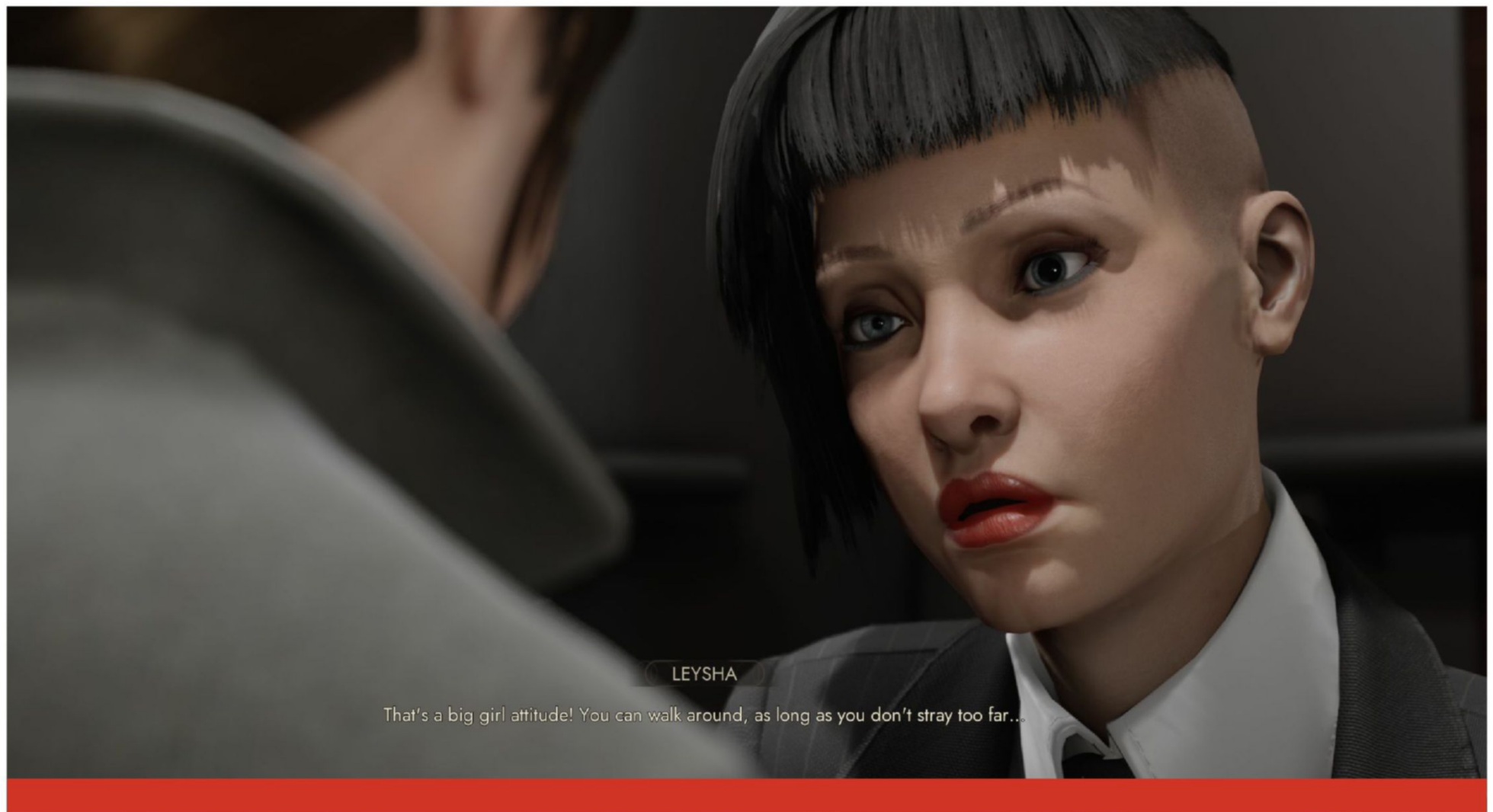
Speaking of plot, Swansong's story was one that I found engaging and thought-provoking, with themes of legacy, memory, and loyalty featured heavily. The plot feels at times like a tragedy unveiling, even though it's very much possible to save the Camarilla from destruction. To the very end, it feels as though the situation could still go well or poorly in equal measure. There's never a moment where the stakes promised don't come through. Success is no more likely than failure, and

failure brings death; if not to the protagonists, then to their allies.

However, those characters were even stronger than the plot itself. Swansong's Boston is a vast web where everyone has an angle and secrets to tell. The three protagonists are some of the most interesting people in this world, and their unique experiences and weaknesses believably place them in crucial moments and missions. All three go on their own personal journeys and can find themselves in different ways. Of the three, I personally found Emem to be the most engaging, though Leysha isn't too far behind.

Galeb is the weakest, though that's not really his fault. His main problem is that, while he himself has an interesting backstory and unique issues that set him apart from the cast, he is constantly surrounded by people who are more interesting — or whose character traits are more relevant to the current situation — than he is. Oftentimes, these also happen to be characters in an antagonistic role — either to the entire trio or just Galeb himself —





so I don't necessarily mind playing as Galeb instead of them. Furthermore, it's hardly a bad thing for Swansong to feature such a wide variety of intriguing characters, even if I must hesitate to elaborate on just who these people are for the sake of avoiding spoilers. While I am still disappointed in Galeb as a character compared to Emem and Leysha, the story and characters are, on the whole, beyond excellent. Yes, there could have been a greater effort made in making Galeb's finale hold more weight in his personal story, but his last major scenes still feature some of the game's more entertaining segments and hold great relevance to the overall issues facing Swansong's cast.

Of course, since the game is so very focused on its amazing cast, that means that the player is going to have to be staring at a lot of character models the whole time, and this leads to what I would call the most hit-or-miss aspect of Vampire: The Masquerade - Swansong. The character models themselves generally look amazing, appearing

about as close as games currently get to looking like real people — aside from the vampire fangs and pale skin typical of the franchise's vampires, of course. In fact, the whole title looks great. I wouldn't hesitate to call most of the settings beautiful. There's even a view of Boston's city streets seen from above which just looks immaculate.

At the same time, some of the character animations feel unfinished, particularly in dialogue. Action scenes are perfectly fluid and engaging, but most moments where characters stop to talk to each other feel incredibly lifeless and stiff. This works when talking to police officers or special agents because many of them are supposed to be stiff in context and there's an acceptable limit on how characters can be posed when the player can initiate discussion from multiple locations, but many conversations don't fall under these categories. Often, characters will clearly start to get agitated or upset, judging from the delivery of

their dialogue, but their faces will remain passive and calm. It's an odd experience to see a shouting match between two mannequins. For most of the characters, I stopped noticing this after a while because I found myself so engaged in the plot, but a few people kept taking me out of the experience.

Another thing that kept me from noticing the odd character animation after a while was the fact that the actual vocal performances were quite good. I never found it hard to believe that a given character's emotional state was genuine and I adored every moment when I could speak to the humans and vampires around me.

The only real issue I found was that a good chunk of the dialogue is muted and almost incoherent because of an odd issue with the camera. You see,

in Swansong, when the camera is far away from a sound — like a character's voice — the sound is treated as though it is being heard at a distance. Additionally, many of the conversation scenes feature moments where the camera is on one character but a different character is speaking, as a way to offer some variety in shot composition. For some strange reason, that distance-based noise volume feature is not turned off when this happens, making every sound heard from off-camera suddenly much quieter than it should be.

There are a few other rare bugs in the gameplay itself, but most of them are either visual oddities — like one woman t-posing for her entire time on screen — or easily solved by exiting and re-entering the game; an annoyance to be sure, but not game-breaking by any means. The worst of this is how





easy it is for the player to interrupt scenes that are supposed to lead to NPCs walking to different locations. Sometimes leaving too soon or initiating a nearby conversation is enough to leave two or more characters stuck in a single place until the player restarts the level. Usually, this only results in side characters having strange dialogue — like with three vampires talking about how busy they are with file gathering while they stand around doing nothing — but in more complicated moments, it can lead to certain mission objectives never triggering. The game is good enough to excuse this, but it can become very annoying if the player isn't careful.

Vampire: The Masquerade - Swansong is a truly beautiful experience that celebrates the Vampire world, puts forth its own spin, and offers an incredible first experience for anyone trying to get into the franchise. It somehow surpasses Big Bad Wolf Studio's prior work and offers an incredibly spooky time for anyone who wishes to sink their teeth into a deep roleplaying experience. If some bugs and weird character animations are too rich for your blood, this might be one to skip, but for anyone else, Swansong is not a game to miss. ■



An engaging experience to sink one's teeth into, Swansong may have its faults, but it offers a blood-curdling plot and amazing characters that simply can't be found anywhere else.

Freshly Frosted

By Alana Dunitz



Publisher: The Quantum Astrophysicists Guild
Developer: The Quantum Astrophysicists Guild
Genre: Puzzle
Release Date: Out Now
Platform: PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch



Who doesn't love doughnuts? Especially frosted ones with colourful sprinkles on the top? If you love puzzle games, and these delicious treats, boy do I have a game for you! Just a warning though, Freshly Frosted is going to make you want to run out and get doughnuts! The premise is simple: get the plain doughnuts out of the oven and transport them via conveyor belts to the frosting and decoration stations.

The first few puzzles are simple to teach you the ropes, but as you progress the game gets a bit trickier. Not only do you require frosting and sprinkles, but now you need to add whipped cream on top. Some customers want even more, so add a cherry on top of that! The challenging part is each step has to be done in order, frosting has to come before sprinkles with whipped cream after. Players will have to figure out how exactly to place the conveyor belt so it goes to each station and out to the delivery counter. If you mess up just hit LB (if you are using an Xbox-style controller) to undo your last move, or hit Y to clear everything that you have done and start anew. When you get really stuck, if you go into the pause menu you can get a

hint. The hint shows you where a couple of pieces of the conveyor belt should go in the correct solution, so this usually gives you an idea of how to place the pieces. If you get tired watching the doughnuts go from station to station at their slow, leisurely pace, you can increase the speed of the belts to make things go faster. I found it kind of relaxing watching the doughnuts travel on their way to get delivered once I solved the puzzle successfully.

You will be completing 12 puzzles to make a box of a dozen doughnuts. Each box has its own theme and new challenges to face. If you thought the puzzles were too simple at the beginning, just wait until the later boxes. Instead of only having one oven and one delivery counter, you now have three of each. Plus, each of the counters requires a different style of doughnut: one only wants plain, the second glazed with sprinkles, and the third wants it all; glazed, with sprinkles, whipped cream, and a cherry. There will be conveyors running every which way, and you have to figure out how to make them go the right way without messing up one of the other routes. There were a few times I had to



look at the end goal and work my way backwards to discover a solution. I caved a couple of times and asked for a hint because I just couldn't see how they fit. I was never frustrated or upset, just felt silly that I couldn't figure out the solution on my own. Or maybe it's because I was craving doughnuts and wasn't able to think of anything else!

The visuals in this game are great, from the perfectly cooked doughnuts to the pastel-coloured frosting. Freshly Frosted is incredibly cute and charming, while at the same time mouth-watering. That sounds weird but just seeing the lines of decorated treats just makes me hungry. The soundtrack keeps beat with the movements of the machines at the different stations, and when the conveyor moves or a machine activates to apply the frosting the music is totally in sync. It was

hypnotising to watch and hear, almost putting me into a trance. I found I was incredibly relaxed and it felt like good stress relief to lose myself in the rhythm of the game.

Freshly Frosted is one of the most enjoyable puzzle games I have played in a long time. It was charming, challenging, and really stimulated my brain. I never got so frustrated that I wanted to quit, if I was stuck I would just take a good look and try to look at it from a different direction. If you enjoy simplistic puzzle games that increase the challenge at a fair rate and are satisfying to solve, Freshly Frosted is a must-play! With 12 boxes of doughnuts to make, these 144 puzzles will keep you busy for a while. Just a warning though, you will be wanting yummy treats after playing this title! ■



Freshly Frosted is a satisfying and charming puzzle game that has you putting frosting and decorations on doughnuts to deliver to hungry customers. With great music and visuals, and challenging puzzles this game really is a treat!

The Quarry

By Erin McAllister



Publisher: 2K
Developer: Supermassive Games
Genre: Horror
Release Date: Out Now
Platform: PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox X|S



Summer camp at Hackett's Quarry is ending and night is falling, but a small group of counsellors decide to capitalise on their van breaking down and have one last night of summer fun. But with hunters, wild animals, and things that go bump in the night lurking about, it may not be quite as fun as they were hoping.

The Quarry, a new cinematic horror title from developer Supermassive Games and publisher 2K Games, follows these kids as they try to survive the night. Already, some may see some large — even concerning — parallels to Supermassive's last huge horror experience, Until Dawn. Both games feature the goal of surviving to the following morning, large and imposing creatures, and even a variety of similar plot beats early on. However, The Quarry makes it very clear that it is a completely different beast, using staples of Supermassive's horror titles in brand new ways. Multiple times throughout my experience, I found myself thinking that a given element was just a weaker version of something in Until Dawn shoehorned in to keep the game on brand. However, in each of these instances, The Quarry undoubtedly proved me wrong to the

highest degree. If, like me, you've played through Until Dawn numerous times or you somehow think that Supermassive's titles have grown stale, trust me: The Quarry will blow you away.

With its summer camp setting and roaming hunters, The Quarry has a perfect setup for a classic slasher-type horror film and the game truly leans into that. There's plenty of small town terror to be had as the counsellors move about the camp, hiding from people and beings that they barely understand as they uncover secret after secret surrounding the campsite and the people that live — or used to live — around it. And when blood starts to spill, no one can blame the kids for reacting poorly as the situation grows ever darker.

Truthfully, many of the details that I found most impressive with The Quarry's narrative only become revealed halfway through the storyline, but at the very least, I can say that the twists and turns are well-managed, surprising on a first playthrough, and heavily foreshadowed by everything from the collectibles to the soundtrack; when something can be all three at the same time,

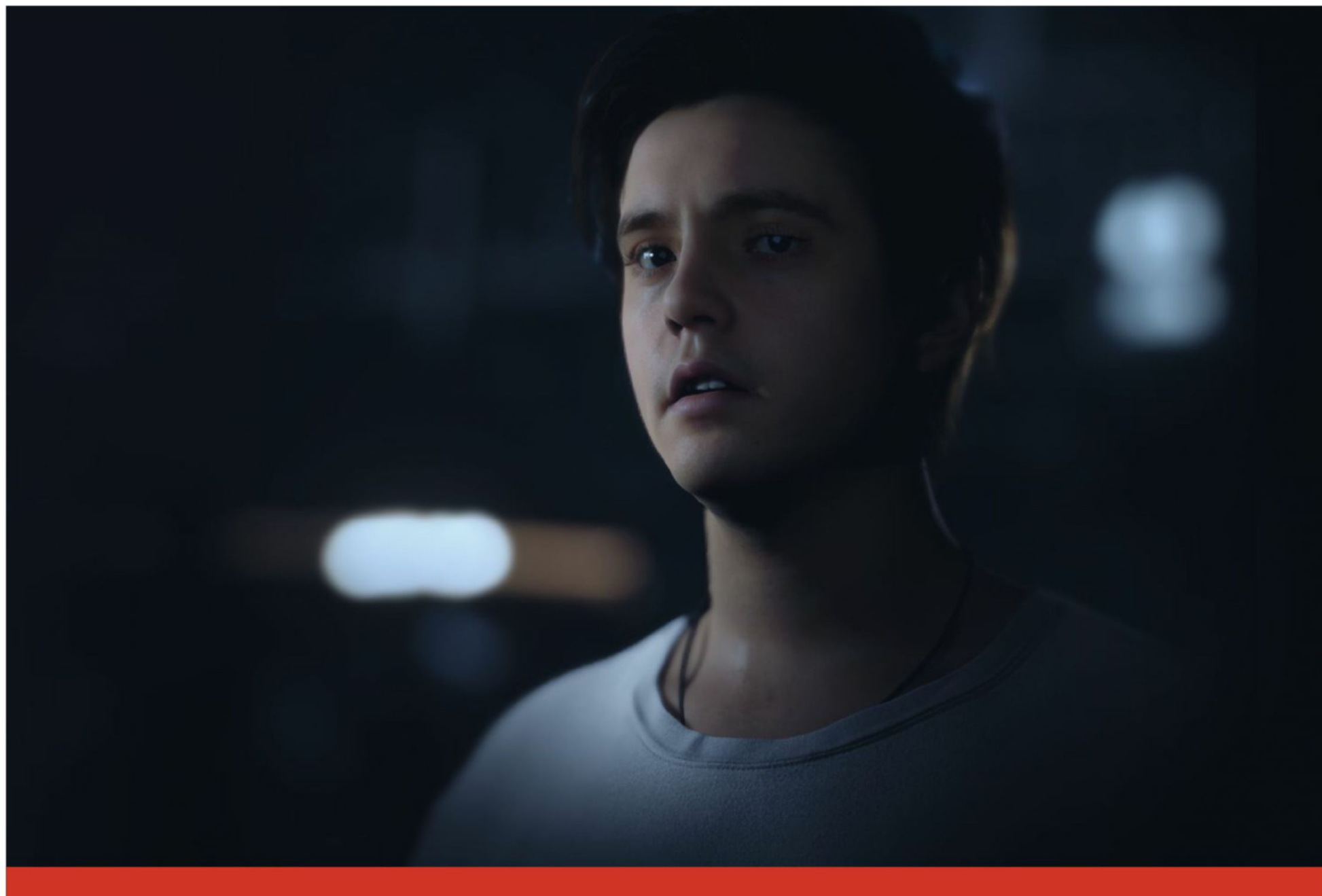
I find that to be truly special. Still, there is one detail I can praise about The Quarry's endgame without fear of spoiling the experience. Actually, make that two.

One aspect of the plot that has been brought up about this title is Supermassive's effort to provide a greater variety to endings than we've yet seen and, despite only having the time to get through the game twice or so, I believe The Quarry delivers. But that's not even the best part about this variety. My one real qualm with Until Dawn had been that, once a character had their moment to die, they were effectively written out of the story, whether or not they survived. If they were even able to rejoin the group, they would usually just hang back and stop getting involved in the events. This is absolutely not the case with The Quarry; while

some people certainly get split up in order to allow certain events to play out with certain characters regardless of who is still alive or not, everyone maintains a part to play to the very end. This is not always the case — depending on which ending a player winds up with — but even when a given character is sidelined for the ending, they are still given a moment unique to them.

Considering how well The Quarry handles surviving characters, the inclusion of a death rewind feature (alongside many accessibility features) feels particularly rewarding. While the death rewinds are included in the Deluxe Edition from the start, players with the Standard Edition must complete one playthrough of the game to access them, acting as a suitable reward for making it through the night. Death rewinds, however, only work three





times in a given night, giving the player an option to undo a death when it happens or save one of their three rewinds to use it down the road. At launch, they work quite well, returning the player to the last chance they had to save a life. Usually, this is right before a death, but can sometimes cause a player to be sent back a chapter or two — or even longer. However, this is currently being updated and soon, among other things, the rewinds will be more descriptive, likely telling the player how long they'll need to go back. Overall, as someone who tends to force quit games when she makes a stupid mistake, I really appreciate being given an undo button in-game, even if I have to use it sparingly.

At the same time, why wouldn't I want to use those rewinds whenever possible? The characters are a joy to be around. I'm still getting to know everyone

as I make my way through the remaining ending states, but I already love them. None are quite as simple as they seem, with hidden depths and feelings that crop up in the right circumstances. While there were some that I didn't like much as people at first, I mostly came around for everyone, even many of the antagonists. Sadly, the people that I found to be the strongest characters in my playthrough also happen to be a tad too close to certain end-game spoilers to mention, so I'll instead move on.

While I've already spoken at length about a lot of the narrative and characters, I haven't yet touched much on the presentation. Hopefully, the screenshots speak for themselves, but I'll talk up the visuals for a moment anyways. The characters all look fantastic and very much like the actors

voicing them, which is an incredibly impressive feat in its own right. Everyone is incredibly emotive while still looking like real people, a difficult balance for any animator and modeller to pull off. In addition, the scenery is just stunning. The water shimmers in the light and looks imposing in the dark, dust particles can be seen inside the older buildings, and I never found my immersion broken for even a second.

The music is just as good, thanks to both the composers and the incredible selection of licensed songs, many of which have quickly jumped onto my own real-life playlists. The acting, writing, and scenery are all very important when setting the tone, but nothing quite drew a chill up my spine or left me shivering in fear as much as the soundtrack. When I was first going through from the beginning,

I found *The Quarry* with headphones almost too scary, but I was eventually able to manage, despite the music's best efforts. However, as powerful as the audio experience was with headphones, I simply must recommend experiencing *The Quarry* on a large television, preferably with surround sound if that's an option. That way, the game can feel even more like the movie experience it was meant to be.

Speaking of which, I should talk about the Movie Mode. With the base game, *The Quarry* offers players the ability to sit back and watch a non-interactive version of the story in three different styles. Watch a perfect run where everyone lives, a wretched one where everyone dies, or customise your experience by deciding how skillful, curious, and empathetic the characters are. All playable



portions are truncated or removed, jumping from interaction to interaction. This felt a bit jarring to go to after playing through the game in full, as many of the areas felt a lot smaller this way. However, after some time watching, I found it easy to get lost in the storyline again.

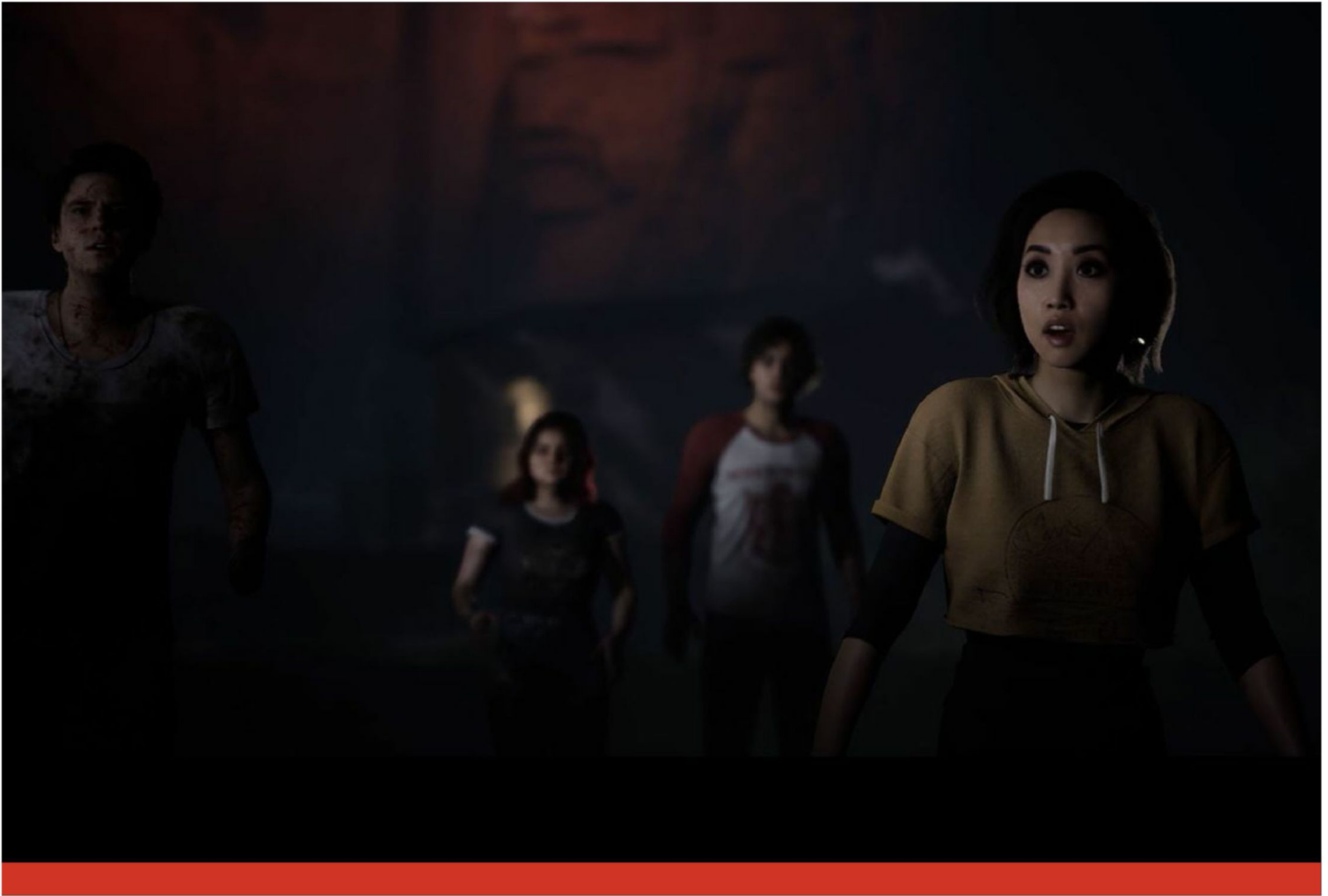
Even so, I would recommend playing through either the single-player or pass-the-controller multiplayer options over the Movie Mode, if only because these make for a more engaging and engrossing experience. Walking around just waiting for something to happen often fills me with as much or more dread than any jumpscare, and there is a visceral feeling to holding down the button during each 'Don't Breathe' segment.

Besides, while I haven't yet succeeded in finding every collectible, I absolutely adored finding each and every one. There are various Clues in one of

three categories that provide additional information around the game's mysteries and then also Evidence, which are essentially larger clues that are a tad more plot relevant, even determining some aspects of the ending. There are also only 10 pieces of Evidence, with one appearing in each chapter save the prologue. It's very fun to scour around the campsite and find each of these in the world, seeing what happens with them.

There's one other collectible — Tarot Cards, one for each of the traditional Major Arcana — which are, interestingly, found by the player specifically; not the characters. All the player has to do is pass by an area and watch as the camera swaps to a different view with a close-up on a card and then press a button. The cards offer special readings as their descriptions, but their real value comes in between chapters, where an old woman offers to show the player a vision of the future relating to the cards





they found. However, as the game goes on and more cards pop up in each chapter, it is revealed that the woman can only show the player one card's vision. This adds a whole new element to The Quarry, where the player must determine what sorts of visions they might get from a given array of cards and pick the one they want to know about most.

No matter which cards are picked or which futures are chosen, The Quarry offers an incredible amount of fun in seeing how many different ways the same night can play out, more so than ever before. But even if someone only wanted to experience this game once, they would still have an amazing time with the title's endearing characters, strong plot, and jaw-dropping visuals. Just, be careful how you play, got it? You won't believe what you'll become...t. ■



The Quarry's charming cast and eye-watering visual splendour are worth the price of entry alone, but its strong, varying plot is where it truly pops.

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